CLASSIC POP PRESENTS

ELTON JOHN

SPECIAL EDITION

The Rocket Man

50 years and still standing

132-PAGE COLLECTORS ISSUE

SIR ELTON THROUGH THE DECADES... THE MAN AND HIS MUSIC

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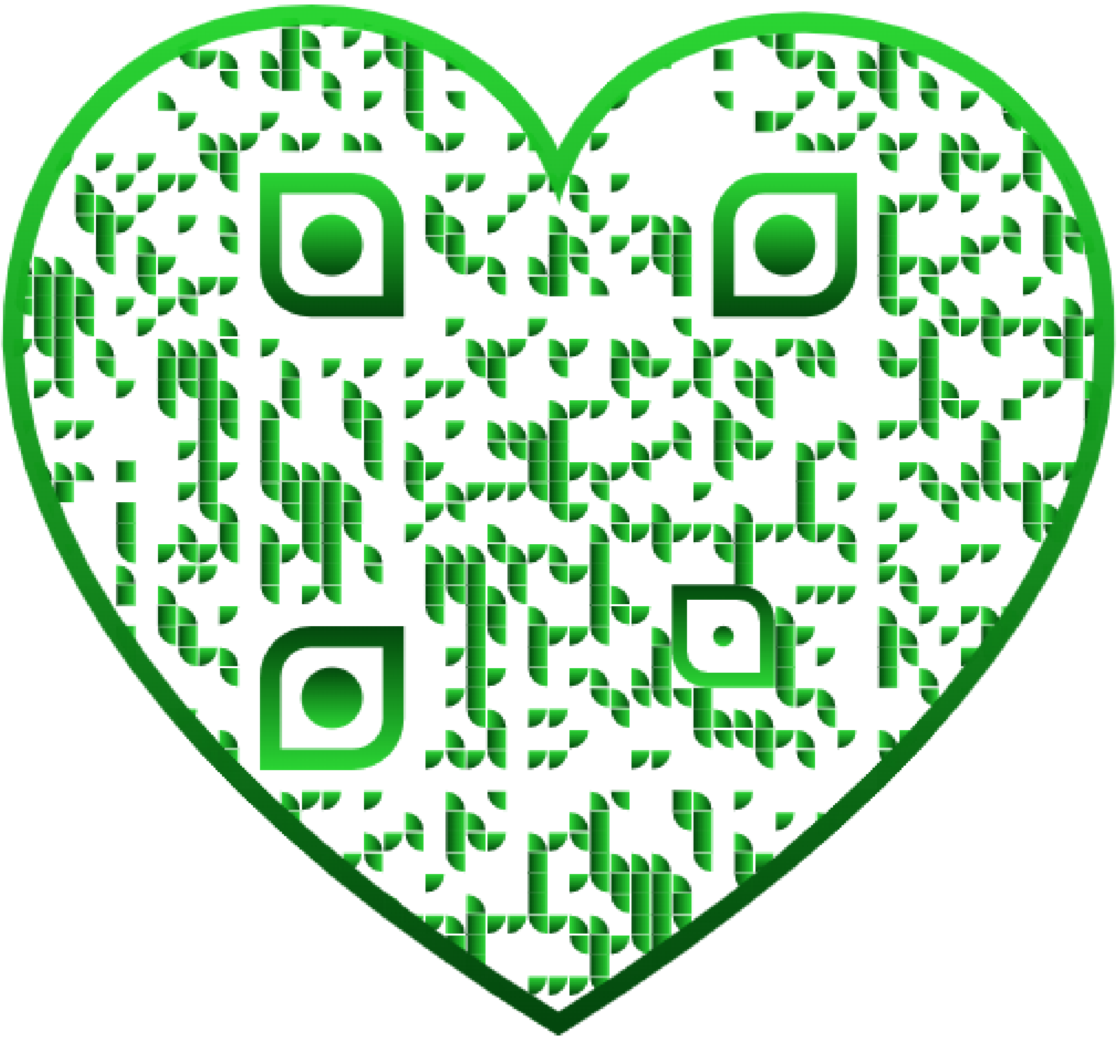

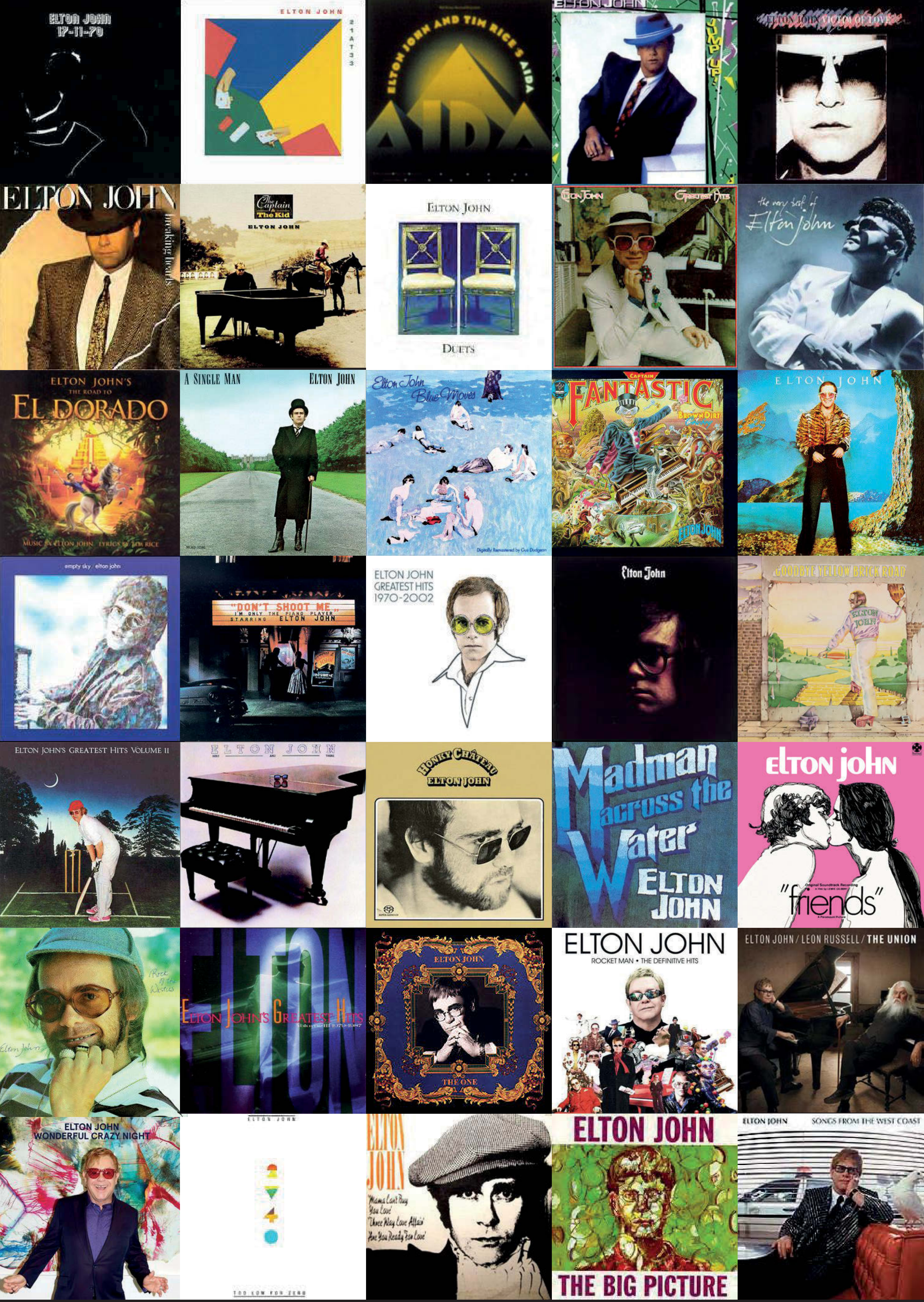
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ELTON JOHN
THE BIG PICTURE
ELTON JOHN
SONGS FROM THE WEST COAST

ELTON JOHN WELCOME

WHEN THE LOCALS WITNESSED A 15-YEAR-OLD 'REGGIE' INSTALLED BEHIND THE PIANO AT THE NORTHWOOD HILLS HOTEL FOR HIS REGULAR WEEKEND KNEES-UP, MOST OF THEM WOULD HAVE SCOFFED AT THE THOUGHT THAT THE ROTUND LITTLE LAD WOULD SOMEDAY BECOME ONE OF THE MOST FAMOUS STARS ON THE PLANET. THAT DISBELIEF WOULD HAVE SHIFTED UP A NOTCH WITH THE REVELATION THAT REG WAS ONE DAY DESTINED TO BE REBORN AS A GAY ICON, A PEACOCK WITH THE WACKIEST OF WARDROBES – WHILE AT THE SAME TIME EMBODYING THE VERY PICTURE OF BENEVOLENCE…

07

Of course, Elton is infamous for that fun-loving sense of flamboyance, those endless eccentric costumes, diva-ish behaviour and spared-no-expense Oscar parties, but strip back all of that admittedly alluring shop frontage and Reginald Dwight is – as we are all fully aware – an absolute master of songwriting.

And what all of the above, when gathered together, reveal, is a man emphatically driven towards the enviable pastime of letting go. Letting go of a tethered childhood via those garish, larger-than-life outfits. Letting go of personal doubts and fears to come out and take up the LGBTQ cause with such outspoken passion and magnanimity. Even letting go of his early musical influences and having the courage to forge his own intrepid musical furrow, regardless of the backdrop.

We like our stars to be the ones who let go of those shackles for us, the social mores that we are incapable (or too scared) to shake off, but wish we could – and Sir Elton John is a shining example of that awe-inspiring freedom. All at once hilarious, jaw-droppingly talented and a complete monster, Elton is a tour de force.

Some might comment that such a man wouldn't even get a look in these days, but I wouldn't be so sure… what of the latest modern misfit, Ed Sheeran? Sure the press and music industry bigwigs may have initially ignored him, but the internet most certainly didn't. Ed is managed by Elton's management company – one unlikely superstar passing the mantle on to another without any of the nonsensical record company rubbish. Brilliant – and yet another example of Elton's altruistic, progressive thinking. Here, we celebrate both Elton's exceptional 50-year songwriting partnership with lyricist Bernie Taupin, and his 70th year on Planet Earth. Happy birthday Sir Elton, we just hope we've done you justice. Enjoy the issue…

Rik Flynn *Editor*

Rik

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DECADES

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It all started with a humble advert placed in the *NME*, and before long Elton John and Bernie Taupin had begun their journey towards becoming songwriting masters

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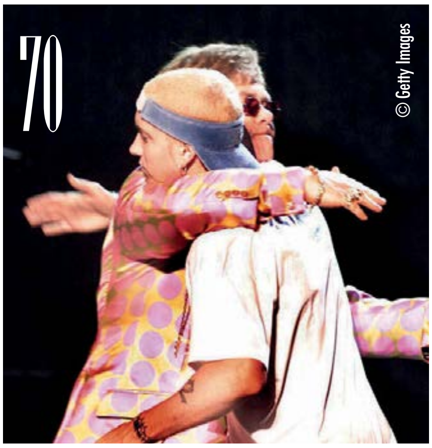

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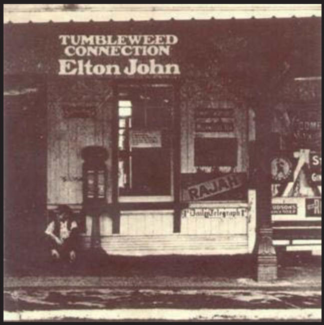
empty sky . elton john

Elton John

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CONNECTION
Elton John

elton john
"friends"

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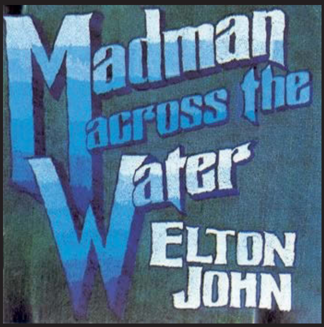
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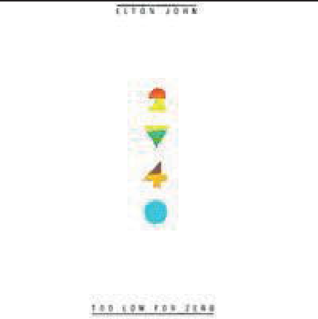
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breaking hearts

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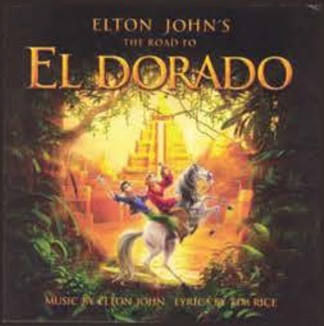
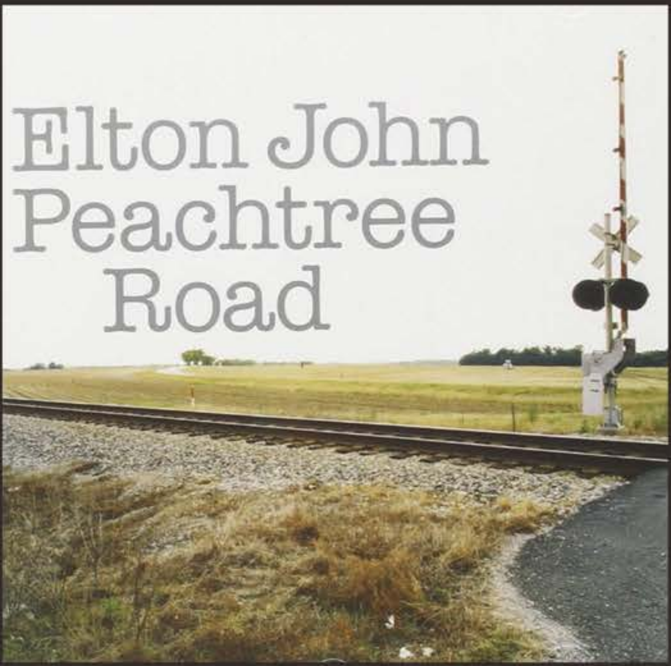
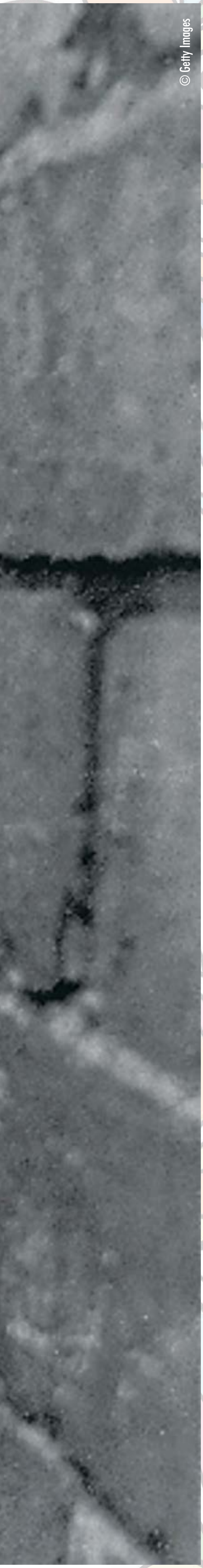




As with the vast array of genres covered in his discography, Elton's sleeve art has conveyed everything from camp extravagance to stark minimalism – plus that Gianni Versace-designed standout...

Elton smiles in front of the lens for his first-ever publicity pictures, taken in Hampstead

POP_UP The *NME* advertisement that Elton and Bernie replied to also brought The Bonzo Dog Doo Dah Band, The Idle Race (with ELO's Jeff Lynne) and Mike Batt (of Wombles fame) to the Liberty label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JOHN DOE

THE EARLY DAYS

AN ADVERTISEMENT IN THE *NME* BROUGHT ABOUT ONE OF POP'S MOST SUCCESSFUL AND LONGEST-RUNNING SONGWRITING PARTNERSHIPS AND SET A CHUBBY, BESPECTACLED PIANIST FROM PINNER ON THE ROAD TO SUPER-STARDOM

IAN RAVENDALE

Without one particular music paper advertisement there may not have ever been an Elton John. The 17th of June 1967 edition of *New Musical Express* ran a quarter page ad from the fledgling Liberty Records, a newly-formed UK offshoot of the American parent company. The label had previously been licensed in the UK through EMI, but was now going it alone and looking for British acts to go alongside a US catalogue that included such names as Bobby Vee, Jan And Dean and Del Shannon. "Liberty wants Talent-Artistes/Composers/Singers-Musicians to form new group" ran the advert, along with an invitation for interested parties to get in touch with Ray Williams, the label's young, newly-appointed head of A&R, to make an appointment or send in a demo tape. Among the hundreds of responses was one from a Lincolnshire farmhand and another from Long John Baldry's piano player.

Elton was born on 25 March 1947, in Pinner, Middlesex, England, and given the name Reginald Kenneth Dwight. He came from a musical family; his aunt played piano and his father was a semi-pro trumpet player in a dance band. There was a piano in his grandparents' house and by the time he was just three Reg was able to play it by ear. Unlike many rock musicians he received some formal musical training, attending London's Royal Academy of Music between the ages of 11 and 15.

When rock'n'roll hit the UK, Reg became a fan of the American stars who played the piano, particularly Jerry Lee Lewis and Little Richard, and was able to entertain his school friends at Pinner County Grammar on the Steinway piano in the school hall, ripping out rock'n'roll hits. Reg would not only sing like his heroes but could also play like them, often kicking away the piano stool and pounding the ivories standing up – Jerry Lee or Little Richard-style.

On Hampstead Heath again, but with added glamour in the form of a fur coat and jaunty hat

POP_UP Bluesology played a month's residency at Hamburg's Top Ten Club in 1966, five years after The Beatles' stint there from March-July 1961

© Getty Images

His stepfather-to-be Fred Farebrother had taken notice of Reg's abilities as a performer and got the teenager a tryout playing piano and singing at the Northwood Hills Hotel on the outskirts of Pinner. Reg passed the audition and on occasions had to play to a tough crowd, which he generally won over with his versatility and stagecraft. He played weekends there for almost two years, making the equivalent of £1.50 plus tips per night. Honing his audience participation skills, he took requests, and could switch from Ray Charles to *Roll Out The Barrel* in seconds.

Reg was also playing with The Corvettes, a local amateur band specialising in rock'n'roll and blues. The band metamorphosed into Bluesology and were gigging around when a friend of Reg's cousin Roy got him an interview for a job as an office boy at Mills Music. He was offered the job and rather than carry on to 'A' levels, Reg left school in early 1965 with four 'O' levels, one of which – of course – was Music. Bluesology found themselves in demand in the music-mad mid-Sixties playing gigs at London's Marquee where they supported successful bands of the day, such as Manfred Mann and The Spencer Davis Group. As they were musically proficient and quick learners, Bluesology also backed visiting American stars including Major Lance, The Drifters, Patti LaBelle And The Blue Bells and Doris Troy on their UK tours, and played in Hamburg, France and Sweden.

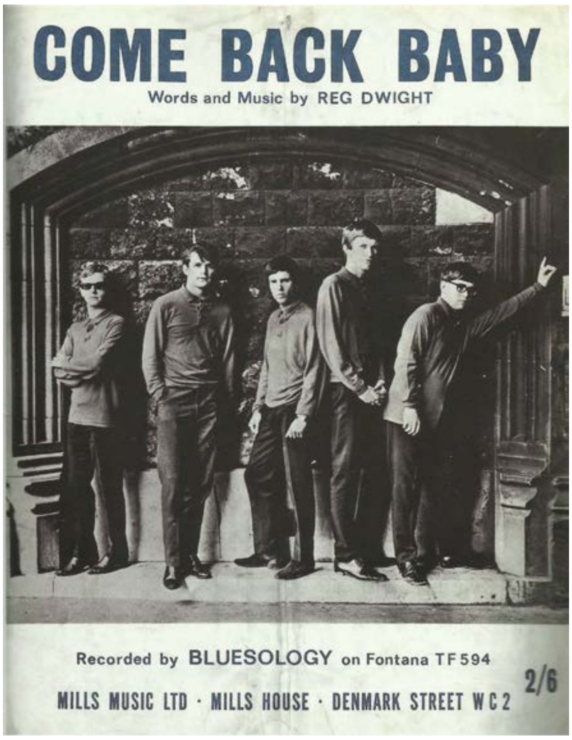
The band had acquired a manager in the form of jeweller Arnold Tendler who paid for the recording of a demo which he then took around the London record companies. Tendler struck lucky with Philips subsidiary Fontana, who came up with a two singles deal for Bluesology. Neither *Come Back Baby*, nor the follow-up *Mr Frantic* came anywhere near the charts and Bluesology's contract with Fontana was not renewed.

MORE THAN WORDS

In late 1966 Long John Baldry was looking for musicians and happened to call in at the Cromwellian Club in South Kensington. Bluesology were playing and Baldry was sufficiently impressed to offer them the gig as his regular backing band, complete with a weekly wage. Baldry's plan was to re-create Brian Auger's Steampacket, where, until recently, he'd been a featured vocalist alongside Julie Driscoll and Rod Stewart.

Long John soon turned Bluesology into a soul revue with a strong line-up of singers: Baldry himself, Marsha Hunt and Alan Walker, all added to original Bluesology vocalist Stuart A Brown. Despite having sung lead on 1965's *Come Back Baby*, Reg was now marooned behind the keyboards contributing only the occasional backing vocal. Long John's #1 hit *Let The Heartaches Begin* moved Baldry and Bluesology up from playing clubs and on to the more lucrative cabaret circuit, which, as Elton later revealed, drove him "around the bend. I think that's the graveyard of musicians, playing cabaret. I'd rather be dead than work in cabaret."

Seeing Liberty's *NME* advert as a potential escape route from chicken-in-a-basket, Reg got in touch with



Thanks to the association with Fontana Records, Bluesology were able to up their game, landing some decent support slots and better headlining shows

Ray Williams and an audition was arranged. But as he confesses in the 1991 publication *Two Rooms: Elton John and Bernie Taupin In Their Own Words*, he wasn't familiar with the audition process and his Northwood Hills Hotel experience didn't help: "The only things I knew how to sing was things I used to sing in the pub – Jim Reeves songs. They weren't jumping up and down at this overweight bespectacled thing singing Jim Reeves!"

Speaking in 1992, Ray remembered being very impressed with the 20-year-old Reg Dwight; "He had something in his voice. He certainly didn't have any songwriting ability at that time, but he had a great voice, even then. It had great warmth, character and appeal. It was a great recording voice."

Reg told Ray (who later went on to manage Elton at the start of his solo career) that he felt lost in his current situation. He wanted to sing in Bluesology but, apart from occasional backing vocals, wasn't allowed. "I felt sorry for him," reported Williams. "He was a very sympathetic guy."

> A POTENTIAL PROBLEM QUICKLY RAISED ITS HEAD: REGGIE WAS A SPIRITED VOCALIST AND DYNAMIC PIANO PLAYER WITH AN EAR FOR MELODY. WHAT HE WAS NO GOOD AT WAS LYRICS

Ray sat Reg down at the office piano and asked him to play. Sufficiently impressed to want to make some demos with him. Williams took Dwight into the Regent Sound studio in Denmark Street to record tracks that he then played to his US boss, Bob Reidorf.

A potential problem quickly raised its head: the young Reggie was a spirited vocalist and dynamic piano player with an ear for melody. What he was no good at, as he readily admitted to Williams, was lyrics. Thinking fast, the A&R man remembered an envelope full of poems that had been sent in response to the *NME* ad from the exotically-named

KEY TRACKS

1965-69

COME BACK BABY

BLUESOLOGY 1965

With, as the sheet music says, "words and music by Reg Dwight", this 1965 release on Fontana is also sung by Elton, with lead vocalist Stuart Brown tackling the B-side's *Time's Getting Tougher Than Tough*. Bluesology manager Arnold Tendler put up the money for both new instruments and the recording of a demo. He struck lucky with Philips subsidiary Fontana, and *Come Back Baby* was produced at Philips's London studios on 3 June, 1965 by Head Of A&R Jack Baverstock. Typical of the songs that the beat boom bands who followed The Beatles were churning out, *Come Back Baby* has lyrics that include lines like: "Come back baby, come back and treat me right/ Come back baby, I'll hold you tight". The lead vocal is unmistakably Elton, and the catchy Beatle-esque melody gives just a hint of what was to come later. The song received limited radio play, most notably on the Philips-sponsored shows on Radio Luxembourg and sank without trace, but allowed the band to add "Fontana Recording Stars" to their publicity material and pushed the pre-Long John Baldry Bluesology onto the next level of gigs, playing venues like The Marquee and the 100 Club.

COME BACK BABY GOT LIMITED RADIO PLAY AND SANK WITHOUT TRACE BUT PUSHED BLUESOLOGY ONTO THE NEXT LEVEL OF GIGS AT THE MARQUEE AND THE 100 CLUB

SCARECROW

DEMO 1967

Ray Williams gave Reg Dwight the envelope of poems that "Bernard" had sent in to see if he could do anything with them. The first set of lyrics that Reg put a melody to was *Scarecrow*, probably inspired by Bernie having seen lots of them while he was growing up on the farm. Says Taupin in *Two Rooms*: "In those days everything went from tape to acetate, which was a very archaic way of making demo records. It was great to watch them being made because you saw your music going from the needle into the groove. I was living with my aunt in Putney and I remember going home with the acetate for *Scarecrow*. I just played it over and over again." The song was recorded using Nicky James and Kirk Duncan's studio time at Dick James Music and was only demoed, never officially released. The John Lennon influence on lines like "your brain is still bleeding" and "the scared forgotten of yesterday's problems" are emphasised by Elton's Lennon-like delivery.

HYMN 2000

EMPTY SKY 1969

Hymn 2000 is the track on *Empty Sky* which also demonstrated that Bernie Taupin hadn't quite escaped his Beatle-style "newspaper taxis" cosmic lyricisms yet. The *Lady Samantha* single, released a few months earlier, had been a credible rock track in the style of the time with Caleb Quaye's raunchy guitar the main instrument rather than Elton's keyboard. *Hymn 2000* reverts to the previous hippy-dippy era and laces it with a dark undercurrent that hints at incest. An Ian Anderson/Jethro Tull type flute swamps Elton's vocals as he battles with lines like "But the comfort of mother was just an appeal for affection/ For the cat from next door was found later at four in surgical dissection", in what is almost certainly the only song lyric to ever rhyme "affection" with "dissection". For the song's conclusion the flute is replaced by some jaunty whistling, courtesy of tape-op Clive Franks.

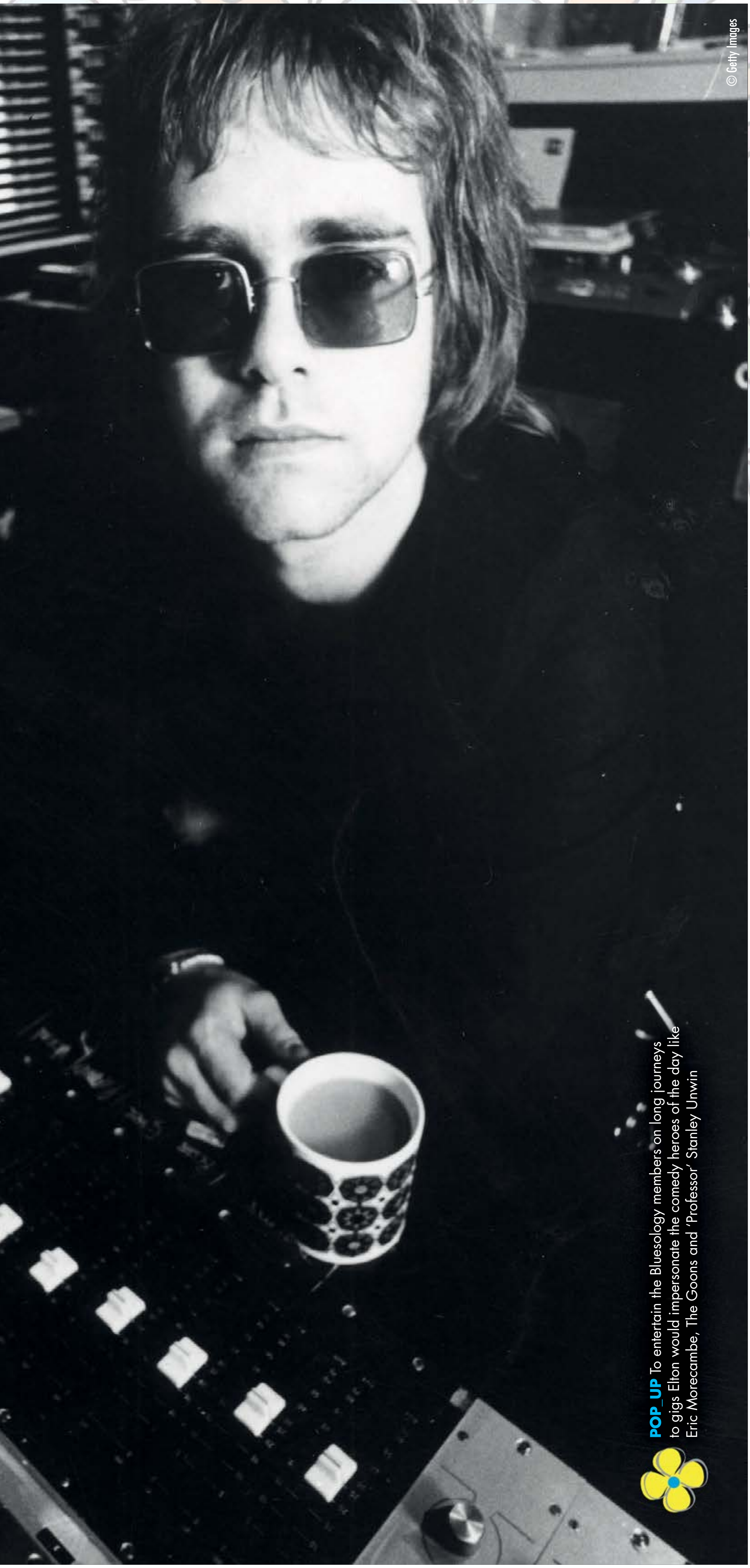
As per-the-title there's an anti-religious subtext with Bernie's lyrics taking several digs at the clergy, most notably: "The vicar is thicker/ And I just can't see through him".

SKYLINE PIGEON

EMPTY SKY 1969

This early John-Taupin composition about a captive bird being set free by a prison inmate had been released in 1968 as a single by Roger James Cooke, shortly to front Blue Mink, and also by Guy Darrell, although neither version made the charts. Surprisingly never released by Elton in the UK or US as a single, the ballad is the standout track on the *Empty Sky* album and one that Elton often still performs live. The track is proof that the Elton and Bernie songwriting partnership had fallen into place, with words and music fitting together perfectly. *Skyline Pigeon* has Elton playing harpsichord (and organ), but the sound and feel of the instrument is perhaps a little too reminiscent of George Martin's middle eight for The Beatles' *In My Life* from 1965's *Rubber Soul* album. Elton may well have felt the same way, as he soon re-recorded *Skyline Pigeon* with piano and strings replacing the harpsichord. This is the version that appears as the B-side of the 1973 hit single *Daniel* and on the CD of the *Don't Shoot Me I'm Only The Piano Player* album as one of four bonus tracks.

Though the pair hit it off when they finally came together, Elton was putting music to Bernie Taupin's lyrics long before he actually met him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POP_UP To entertain the Bluesology members on long journeys to gigs Elton would impersonate the comedy heroes of the day like Eric Morecambe, The Goons and 'Professor' Stanley Unwin

Maltkiln Farm, Owmby-by-Spital in Lincolnshire by one Bernard Taupin. "He said he was basically a poet, but felt that his poems could be set to music… could I help him?" continues Williams in *Two Rooms*. "So I sent Elton some lyrics and they began exchanging these via post.

"I thought of putting those two together out of all the hundreds [of responses to the advert] because I actually had some feeling for them. I felt they had an ability. Bernie would probably look at those lyrics now and laugh, but there was something. With Elton, I loved his voice, he had a super voice, no question about it. It didn't matter what he looked like at that time. It was just a gut reaction – let's put them together."

Taupin's lyrics were imaginative and not the standard chart fare, but the young Dwight was also some distance removed from the atypical pop singer of the time. The first of Bernie's lyrics that Reg put a melody to was *Scarecrow*; the process had begun, as Elton explains: "I was receiving Bernie's lyrics and writing the songs and doing demos at Dick James Music before I even met Bernie."

Says Ray Williams: "They hit it off straight away. They were like an old couple. It was obvious that they got on very well together – they didn't get in each other's way. That was the secret: Bernie didn't want to be a singer or play piano and Elton really couldn't write the lyrics, so it just fitted. They respected each other's position."

POSTAL SERVICE

Liberty Records decided to pass on Elton and Ray Williams tried to interest the company's publishing wing, Metric Music, in signing him as a songwriter instead. This too was rejected. Metric had also recently turned down another couple of Williams's discoveries, songwriters Nicky James and Kirk Duncan. Confident in the duo's talents, he suggested to the pair that the three of them could form a company themselves.

Taking from the first two letters of each's Christian name, Niraki Music was born. Williams then struck a deal with Gralto Publishing – Graham Nash, Allan Clarke and Tony Hicks of The Hollies – that Niraki's songs would be published by their company. Gralto was managed by Dick James, the UK's most successful

© Getty Images

BERNIE

A MAN OF HIS WORDS

Elton became acquainted with Bernie Taupin's lyrics before actually meeting him in person: "One day I was doing a demo session and noticed him in the corner. I said, 'Are you the lyric writer?' and he said 'Yeah' and we went around the corner for a cup of coffee, and that was it really."

The young Bernie had been read many of English literature's great poems by his grandfather, a retired teacher, along with classics like *Winnie-The-Pooh*, *The Wind In The Willows* and the Narnia books. Like many other children of the Fifties, he had an interest in the American West. This soon went beyond the John Wayne version, and Bernie began reading the true-life stories of Billy The Kid, Wyatt Earp and Davy Crockett.

It wasn't long before Taupin started writing his own stories and poems. A chance exposure to his uncle's collection of 78s introduced him to rock'n'roll and blues. He would also scour the few radio stations of the time searching for Western-influenced music from the likes of Marty Robbins and Johnny Cash. Sixties pop was moving quickly, and Bernie soon added Bob Dylan and The Beatles to his favourites and wrote poems influenced by the more word-centric works of both, such as *Strawberry Fields Forever* and *Subterranean Homesick Blues*.

Leaving school at 15, Taupin ended up working as a labourer on a Lincolnshire farm where he was given tasks that included taking dozens of chicken corpses struck down by fowl pest to the incinerator. Laid off from the farm, Bernie was wondering what to do when he saw the Liberty advert. Thinking he had nothing to lose, he put together a compilation of poems which his mother kindly sent off. Some time later Ray Williams got in touch, inviting Bernie to call in "the next time he happened to be in the area", which Taupin eventually did. Another respondent had called in the previous week – and mentioned that he was no good with lyrics…

These days, with Taupin living on a ranch in Santa Ynez, California and Elton's busy touring schedule, they cross paths sometimes only once a year. "Bernie will give me a parcel of lyrics and then bugger off!" Elton relates. "He won't explain what they're about! I've got to work them out and see which ones I can put music to." In *Two Rooms* Elton describes their relationship as: "… miraculous, it's been exciting, it's been enthralling… it's been beyond wildest dreams, it's been sad, it's been tough, it's been hard and it's been easy. Having Bernie in my life is such an important thing."

"We started out as childish buddies," adds Taupin. "There was brotherly love there. If I remain anything with Elton, it's a real fan. It's a great honour to be able to work with somebody who is such a brilliant musician and singer."

POP_UP Elton once asked journalist Nina Myskow – at that point working on *Jackie* magazine – to write song lyrics for him in case his partnership with Bernie didn't work out.

music publisher, with Lennon and McCartney's Northern Songs part of their portfolio. Putting Nicky and Kirk both on a £10 weekly retainer, the pair were also allowed unlimited access to Dick James Music's studio. William's other pet project, Reggie Dwight, spent most of the summer of 1967 (when he wasn't playing with Bluesology) in DJM's studio demoing songs that he'd written with either Nicky or Kirk or Bernie, which could then be offered to Gralto for use by The Hollies or other recording acts.

The plan had been that Elton would supply melodies alternately to Nicky and Kirk and also Bernie, but this scheme was swiftly shelved when it became apparent that Taupin and Elton together was the combination that worked and they were soon writing a dozen songs a week. Reggie was still reluctantly making his bread and butter touring with Bluesology, and with Bernie either in London staying with Reg and his mum or back in Lincolnshire on the farm, the pair usually collaborated via post – and, to this day haven't written a song where they are physically working together in the same room.

The lyricist would send the pianist a new batch of lyrics at regular intervals, which generally ended up being demoed in almost unlimited, if unauthorised down-time at DJM studios. Dick James eventually got wind of this, but rather than show the duo the door for using his studio without his say-so, he listened to the demos. Liking them, he signed Reg and Bernie to his standard £10-a-week songwriters' contract. Dwight immediately left Bluesology, which, he later revealed, was "the best day of my life".

I've Been Loving You, written by John and Taupin, was issued by DJM's in-house production company, This Record Co., via Philips in March 1968 as the first single by the newly re-christened Elton John, the name being inspired by two of his Bluesology band-mates, vocalist John Baldry and saxophonist Elton Dean.

BREAKING COVERS

Elton and Bernie were still coming up with songs for other acts to cover as part of their songwriter duties. Dick James sold his interest in Northern Songs to ATV Music in 1969 and now had the time, money and inclination to pursue new projects. Steve Brown had recently been appointed Head of Promotions, and he persuaded James to set up DJM Records to issue Elton John singles and albums.

James, having published the lion's share of Lennon and McCartney's output, certainly knew a good pop song when he heard it and he wasn't hearing it as often as he would have liked from Bernie and Elton.

"It got a little demoralising after a while because Dick kept saying these songs are a little esoteric," Taupin recalled in *Two Rooms*. "So we were pushed into writing commercial material for other people. They were trying to get us to write songs for the stock Top 40 people who were at the time very dependent on songwriters: Tom Jones, Englebert Humperdinck, Cilla Black and Lulu. We had no qualms at first because we were getting paid which wasn't too bad, because otherwise I could be driving a tractor or shovelling dead chickens into an incinerator!"

Steve Brown was given the task of trying to get something happening for Elton and Bernie. They were still beavering away trying to write commercial songs for name acts but were also surreptitiously writing material closer to their hearts for a debut Elton John album. Brown listened to everything the duo had written so far and opinioned that this material was far superior to their attempts at cracking the Top 20, all written primarily to keep Dick James happy. After all, two years of trying had produced no hits.

Lady Samantha, the follow-up single to *I've Been Loving You*, was a turntable hit, earning plays from influential Radio 1 DJ's such as Tony Blackburn, John Peel and Johnny Walker. Despite the following single *It's Me That You Need* not getting the same amount of airplay, Radio 1's tangible endorsement that Elton could be going places was enough for Steve Brown to be able to persuade James to let him produce an Elton John album.

CASTLES IN THE SKY

Still finding their feet as a songwriting unit, the true test of the John-Taupin partnership was writing a full album's worth of material. Having free access to the DJM studios, even before the *Empty Sky* album was given the go-ahead, Elton had cut lots of demos of the songs he and Bernie were writing, as Taupin told Paul Gambaccini in 1974: "That material was so separate from anything we did later. We were writing very, very commercial pop songs and also pseudo-intellectual flower power – *Mirrors Of My Mind* and *Lemonade Lake* stuff. Really awful! We were both very naive as far as writing songs and their construction."

Named after the first track on the album, *Empty Sky* was produced by Steve Brown at DJM's studio and featured guitar courtesy of in-house engineer Caleb Quaye (who, along with bass player Dave Glover, was also a member of the band Hookfoot) with Roger Pope and Nigel Olsson on drums, and bass players Tony and Dee Murray. The album cost £2,000 to make, a small sum even by 1969 standards. The sessions were often during downtime necessitating Elton walking back to his digs in the Salvation Army hostel in Oxford Street at four o'clock in the morning.

At last getting to record the songs that he and Taupin truly believed in was a momentous moment for Elton, as he recalled on the sleeve notes for the 1995 CD reissue of the album: "I remember when we finished work on the title track it just floored me. I thought it was the best thing I'd ever heard in my life."

Very much of its time, *Empty Sky* is a signpost to what would ultimately become the John-Taupin melodic and lyrical style. Bernie's words show a conscious effort to get away from the pop songs

Elton described walking away from Bluesology as "the best day of my life"

© Getty Images

A far more demure Elton poses for an intimate portrait in London, circa 1969

POP_UP Elton's long-term drummer Nigel Olsson made the UK Top 10 three years before his boss as a member of Plastic Penny, who hit the charts in January 1968 with *Everything I Am*

Dick James had them writing. He reflects on his Lincolnshire roots in *Lady What's Tomorrow?*, touches upon incest with *Hymn 2000*, unleashes his obsession with America (where he'd never been) on *Western Ford Gateway*, ruminates about prison in *Empty Sky* (despite never having been inside one) and reminisces about his favourite (deceased) dog in *Gulliver*… all themes not normally sung about in 1969.

With *Lady Samantha* conspicuous by its absence, the strongest song melodically is the poignant *Skyline Pigeon*. Otherwise Elton's music is a mish-mash of styles and genres popular at the time. "The *Empty Sky* album was the beginning of us being pulled together as a songwriting team," Bernie opined. "There are some really bad things on that album!"

Philips, DJM's distributors, passed on the album, prompting Dick James' son Stephen (who handled most of DJM's day-to-day business) to set up DJM as an independent label with *Empty Sky* as the first release. The album sold 4,000 copies at the time and would have undoubtedly sold more had *Lady Samantha* been included. The concept of pre-issued singles being included on albums had yet to occur to the record industry, and *I've Been Loving You* and *It's Me That You Need* are similarly missing.

Elton submitted a song for Lulu to sing as one of six numbers put forward to the public vote for the UK entry to the 1969 Eurovision Song Contest. *I Can't Go On Living Without You* was written completely by Elton, although credited to John and Taupin. "It came last! But anything at that point when you haven't made it was what you lived for," Elton recalled. "It's what kept you going; the hope that one day someone will have a hit with one of your songs."

TAUPIN REFLECTS ON HIS LINCOLNSHIRE ROOTS, TOUCHES UPON INCEST, UNLEASHES HIS OBSESSION WITH AMERICA, RUMINATES ABOUT PRISON… AND REMINISCES ABOUT HIS DOG

As a very accomplished keyboard player, Elton found himself in demand for session work in the late Sixties and played on The Hollies' *He Ain't Heavy He's My Brother*, The Family Dogg's *A Way Of Life*, The Barron Knight's *An Olympic Record*, *Mr Boyd* by Argosy (Roger Hodgson from Supertramp's first band) and The Scaffold's *Gin Gan Goolie* and also sang backing vocals on Tom Jones' *Delilah* and *Daughter Of Darkness*.

At the time, Woolworths' had their own Embassy label which specialised in cut-price albums and EPs of cover versions of the hits of the day, performed as close to the originals as possible. Elton sang on covers of The Brotherhood Of Man's *United We Stand*, Stevie Wonder's *Signed Sealed Delivered*, Simon and Garfunkel's *Bridge Over Troubled Water* and many others, including a throat-mangling Robin Gibb impersonation on *Saved By The Bell*. Surprisingly, Elton carried on this gig until well into 1970.

But things were about to change very rapidly. *Your Song*, taken from 1970's *Elton John* album, was a massive hit, both in the UK and US in early 1971. America was waiting for Elton. ■

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Elton poses on the runway in California during his 1974 US tour; the plane was the very first Boeing 720 produced

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Rocket Science

IN TERMS OF RECORD SALES AND CONCERT TICKETS, ELTON JOHN WAS THE BIGGEST STAR ON THE PLANET THROUGHOUT THE SEVENTIES. WITH THE HARD GRAFT OF THE SIXTIES BEHIND HIM, AND WITH BERNIE TAUPIN BY HIS SIDE, HE BEGAN HIS IRRESISTIBLE ASCENT IN THE DECADE THAT HE TOTALLY DOMINATED

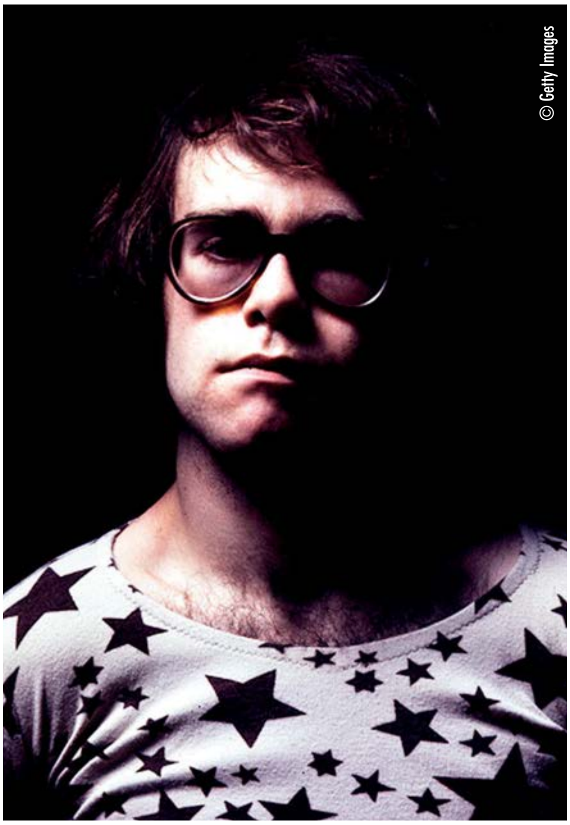
PAUL LESTER

He may not have enjoyed the critical plaudits of David Bowie in the first half of the decade or the media furore of Johnny Rotten in the second; nevertheless, when it comes to Seventies artists, there was none bigger than Elton John. In fact, commercially, he bestrode the decade like a pudgy, platform-booted, oversized, neon-spectacled colossus. He had seven consecutive No. 1 albums Stateside – which was a record – and his 25 Top 40 hits guaranteed him radio ubiquity on both sides of the Atlantic.

His vertical ascent seemed to start almost as the new decade began. Of course, he was no overnight success, having toiled at the blues and R&B coal-face for much of the Sixties, and there had been a faltering start with his

POP_UP *Rocket Man* was covered by William Shatner at the 1978 Science Fiction Film Awards, and by Stewey, the character from TV cartoon *Family Guy*

WITH SEVEN CONSECUTIVE NO. 1 ALBUMS IN AMERICA AND 25 TOP 40 HITS, ELTON BESTRODE THE DECADE LIKE A PUDGY, PLATFORM-BOOTED, OVERSIZED, NEON-SPECTACLED COLOSSUS



During the Seventies Elton evolved into a fully-fledged rock star of gargantuan proportions, and at the start of the decade his flamboyancy was beginning to show

1969 debut album, *Empty Sky*. But virtually as soon as the Seventies were ushered in, it was lift-off, and he didn't stop for the next 10 years. The rocket man dominated every year with his singles, albums and antics, whether it was consorting with former Beatles or cavorting with royalty. His druggy escapades are a matter of record, as are his volatility, ostentation and caprice. In terms of stature the Pinner boy born Reginald Kenneth Dwight may have been small, but in every other respect he was larger than life.

LOVE AFFAIR

His second album was self-titled, and in a sense it was his debut proper – it was actually his first to come out in America (*Empty Sky* didn't get an official release till 1975). Released in April 1970, *Elton John* was suitably grand and lavish, with production from Gus Dudgeon (who had worked on The Zombies' *She's Not There* and Bowie's *Space Oddity*) and intricate arrangements from Paul Buckmaster (who would work the following year on The Rolling Stones' *Sticky Fingers*); the latter's orchestral settings, all cellos, violins and harpsichords, provided the perfect lush context for John's joint compositions with lyricist, co-conspirator and right-hand-man Bernie Taupin.

It was an album largely comprising baroque ballads, with a few rockers. Standouts included *Border Song*, his first song to chart in the US, where it peaked at No. 92 in May '70, and *Your Song*, which became his first bona fide hit (Top 10 on both sides of the Atlantic) when issued as a single later that year. The quietly emphatic LP opener, it was a love song about love songs that posited John as being just as knowing and meta-referential, in his own way, as Bowie, Marc Bolan and Bryan Ferry.

Although the album's release coincided with the rise of the singer-songwriter and west coast troubadour, it was immediately evident that Elton was different to James Taylor, Jackson Browne, Neil Young and the rest. If he had anything in common with an American solo artist of the period, it was Laura Nyro, the angel of New York's tenements whose first three albums – 1967's *More Than A New Discovery*, 1968's *Eli And The Thirteenth Confession* and 1969's *New York Tendaberry* – had so transfixed him with their darkly ornate confessionals. Nyro, like John, seemed to come more from a Broadway musical tradition than rock'n'roll. There was clearly an affinity with American(a) idioms here – and on the next album, *Tumbleweed Connection* (October '70) – but they were part of a wider palette. Unlike the Laurel Canyon set, this was no winsome acoustic guitar-slinger in denim. No, here was a showman, with all the flamboyance that entailed.

THERE WAS AN AFFINITY WITH AMERICANA, BUT UNLIKE THE LAUREL CANYON SET, THIS WAS NO WINSOME ACOUSTIC GUITAR-SLINGER. HERE WAS A SHOWMAN, WITH ALL THE FLAMBOYANCE THAT ENTAILED

MINSTREL AT THE TROUBADOUR

It was in August 1970 that American audiences got to witness Elton in all his early swashbuckling glory, during his US live debut: a six-night sold-out run at West Hollywood's Troubadour that has since acquired legendary status – in 1990, *Rolling Stone* magazine ranked them among the 20 most important concerts in rock history. At the Troubadour, he performed with his band – Nigel Olsson on drums, Dee Murray on bass – and played the house piano that his idol Nyro had used just two weeks before. Among the 300-strong crowd were such notables as Quincy Jones, Leon Russell, and members of The Beach Boys and MOR superstars Bread. He even had no lesser a songwriting luminary than Neil Diamond introduce him onstage. "From the moment we arrived, it was just pandemonium all the way," Elton recalled. "The first night at the Troubadour was hype night, with all the record company people and the press, and the first set was incredible and it stayed that way. We got unbelievable reviews – I didn't see one bad one." True enough: Robert Hilburn, the music critic for the *Los Angeles Times*, declared: "He's going to be one of rock's biggest and most important stars."

If Elton was becoming a US star, his music was evincing more of an American influence; *Tumbleweed Connection*, like its predecessor a Top 5 entry here and in the States, was a sepia affair steeped in folk, country and the music of The Band (even if the cover image was actually of Sheffield Park station, 30 miles south of London). Unlike the other significant artists of the era, Bowie, Roxy Music and Marc Bolan, who were too quintessentially English to appeal to Americans, John – like The Beatles and the Stones before him – managed to sell their music back to them.

Elton in action circa 1970, the year he wowed US audiences in what *Rolling Stone* placed amongst the most important run of concerts in rock history

POP UP Elton opened his career-changing first Troubadour show with *Your Song* and went on to cover *Great Balls Of Fire* (knocking the piano stool over, Jerry Lee-style) and The Stones' *Honky Tonk Women*

Elton performs at Doug Weston's Troubadour on August 25, 1970 in West Hollywood, LA

© Getty Images

Key Recordings

1970-72

ELTON JOHN (1970)
With ornate arrangements courtesy of Paul Buckmaster, Elton John's second album was a baroque treat. *Sixty Years On* featured a swarm of bees (actually violins), plus John singing with almost courtly fervour. On *I Need You To Turn To*, the harpsichord lent the song the feeling of a madrigal, and *First Episode At Hienton* and *The King Must Die* were more rococo than rock'n'roll, but *Take Me To The Pilot* and *The Cage* amply proved – once again – that, yes, you really could create convincing rock'n'roll with a piano taking over the foreground. *No Shoe Strings On Louise* was salty, Stonesy country-rock a la *Beggars Banquet*, with John showing early signs of a vocal style best described by Tom Doyle in his book *Captain Fantastic: Elton John's Stellar Trip Through The '70s* as "scenery-chewing".

TUMBLEWEED CONNECTION (1970)
There are no big well-known hits from this, his third album, but as a cohesive work it is one of his best. Elton and his writing partner Bernie Taupin had yet to set foot on American soil but they managed a convincing LP homage to the land of the Westerns they watched as kids and earthy rockers such as The Band circa *Music From Big Pink*, with songs about outlaws, confederates and missions. With Gus Dudgeon once more at the production controls and Paul Buckmaster in charge of arrangements, songs such as *Come Down In Time* have the lush feel of orchestrated roots music, while *Country Comfort* – recorded in 1970 for *Gasoline Alley*, the second album by Elton's sparring partner in the Seventies superstar stakes, Rod Stewart – features steel guitar and fiddle.

MADMAN ACROSS THE WATER (1971)
The two best-known tracks here – *Levon* and *Tiny Dancer* (which achieved a new ubiquity after its use in that scene in Cameron Crowe's 2000 movie *Almost Famous*) – were modest American hits only, but they remain staples of his catalogue. Elton's fourth studio album in two years was a sign of his creative ambition; perhaps even an early attempt to keep up with his rival David Bowie, who was working at the same time on his LP *Hunky Dory*. It certainly indicated that here was a serious album artist, not just one of the burgeoning glam brigade who were capable mainly of bold, brash singles. No, *Madman* had breadth and depth, all complex, five- and six-minute epics with anthemic pretensions that mooted Elton as a progressive rocker in the guise of a singer-songwriter.

HONKY CHÂTEAU (1972)
By his fifth album (sixth if you include the *Friends* soundtrack album; seventh if you count *17-11-70*), Elton was sufficiently established that he could insist on the musicians he wanted to use on his recordings. So out went the studio pros he had employed thus far and in came his touring band: Davey Johnstone on guitar, Dee Murray on bass and Nigel Olsson on drums. They all settled into the Château d'Hérouville, an 18th century French manor house, and began work on what some consider to be his finest album. The best-known numbers are *Honky Cat* and *Rocket Man* – official title: *Rocket Man (I Think It's Going to Be a Long, Long Time)* – but there are classic "deep cuts" wherever your needle alights: *Mellow*, *Mona Lisas And Mad Hatters*, *I Think I'm Going To Kill Myself*…

In November 1970, he released his first live album *17-11-70* (*11–17–70* in the States). Recorded at a show aired in front of 100 or so fans from A&R Studios on WABC-FM in New York City, it showcased Elton the hard rocker and bluesy singer-songwriter (pace the inclusion of *Sixty Years On*), while his version of the Stones' *Honky Tonk Women* confirmed John was as much about rock swagger as he was pop camp.

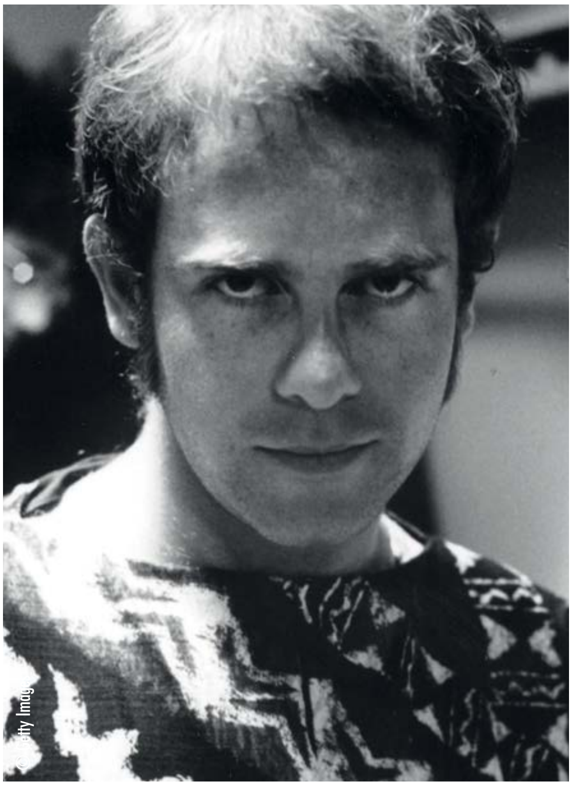
He was all things to all people – and, with Elton, there was something for everyone. There was so much of him, too: in the first half of the Seventies, he released nine studio albums, the sort of frenzied creativity not witnessed since the heyday of The Beatles and The Beach Boys. In March 1971 came the soundtrack to the movie *Friends*. It was followed that November by his fourth studio album proper, *Madman Across The Water*, featuring two of his best-loved songs – *Levon* (No. 24 in the US) and *Tiny Dancer*, whose No. 41 peak Stateside belies its familiarity through its appearance in Cameron Crowe's 2000 movie *Almost Famous*. The LP itself only managed No. 41 in the UK, the lowest-charting album of his career (it fared better in the States, reaching No. 8). And yet it was an expansive, ambitious affair, with Paul Buckmaster's string arrangements used to full effect and musical sections that verged on progressive rock.

All he needed was a bona fide global hit to cement his burgeoning reputation as the decade's biggest new star. That he got in spades in April 1972 with the plaintive *Rocket Man (I Think It's Going to Be a Long Long Time)*. At No. 2 in the UK and No. 9 in the US, it made John a household name. And although the music was from a different planet, his colourful-showman persona made him a star every bit as exorbitant as the glam brigade (Bowie, his arch chart nemesis Bolan, Slade, Sweet, Gary Glitter), even if, stout and balding, he was an unlikely scream idol.

© Getty Images

Above **Beach Boys Al Jardine, Carl Wilson and Mike Love join Elton onstage on June 3, 1972 at the Crystal Palace Bowl in London**

Right **Backstage in 1972: Elton played over 150 shows that year in England, Scotland, Germany, US, Canada and Italy**



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MR. BIG

The star became a superstar with his next release: his fifth studio album, *Honky Château*, titled after the 18th century French manor house where it was recorded, Château d'Hérouville. The album reached pole position in the US, the first of seven consecutive US No. 1 albums for Elton. Warmly received by critics at the time, it can now be viewed as the other great collection of loose, louche rock'n'roll from 1972, alongside the Stones' *Exile On Main St.*, recorded at another French mansion, Nellcôte. It featured, apart from *Rocket Man* and *Mona Lisas And Mad Hatters*, the piano-vampy New Orleans funk homage *Honky Cat* (his 10th single), the deceptively jaunty *I Think I'm Going To Kill Myself*, and *Amy*, featuring Jean-Luc Ponty's virtuoso electric violin. Elton ended the year in nostalgic mood, with the late-Fifties/early-Sixties rock'n'roll-referencing *Crocodile Rock*, his first US No. 1 single. It confirmed John both as reverent keeper of the flame first lit by the iconic Elvis, Little Richard and Jerry Lee Lewis, and as brash, gaudy iconoclast.

Over the next three years, Elton just kept getting bigger and bigger, as he put on ever more extravagant concerts that posited him as a sort of rock'n'roll Liberace, and discovered the joys of on-tour excess – around this time he experimented with marijuana for the first time and had his own private jet, the very enormity and gaudiness of it all prompting the sort of behaviour that would later be immortalised in the rockumentary *Tantrums & Tiaras*.

THE HIGH ROAD

In January 1973, *Don't Shoot Me I'm Only The Piano Player*, another product of the Château d'Hérouville, became his second US and first UK No. 1 album. The hits this time were *Crocodile Rock* and the

"TO ME *YELLOW BRICK* IS THE ULTIMATE POP ALBUM. IF YOU WANTED TO TELL KIDS ABOUT POP MUSIC, YOU COULD PLAY THEM THAT ALBUM, BECAUSE IT'S GOT SO MANY INFLUENCES ON IT"

POP_UP *Don't Shoot Me…* got its title from Groucho Marx, who insisted the star's name was backwards and must be 'John Elton'. He told the King of Comedy: "Don't shoot me, I'm just the piano player."

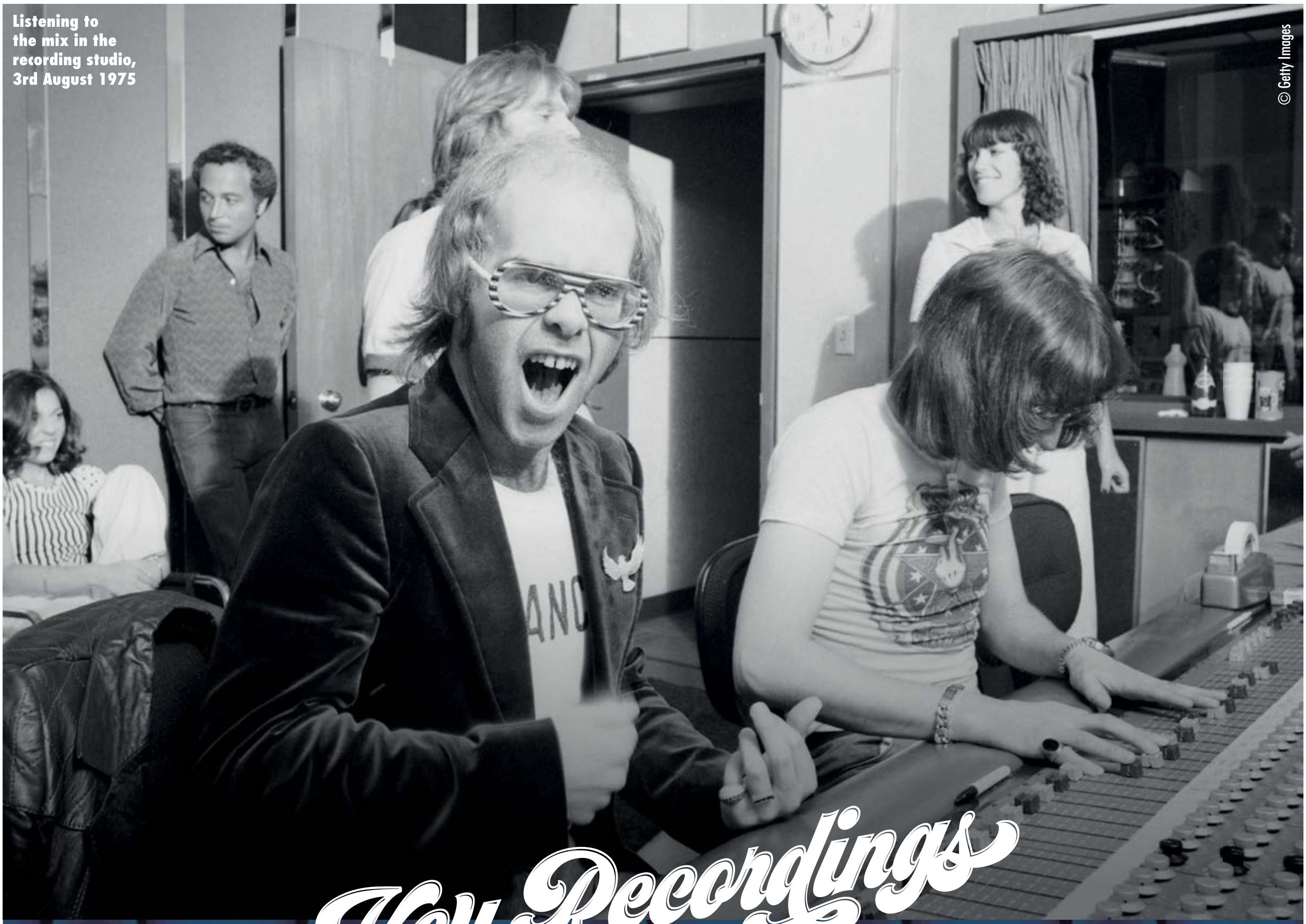
Elton at the piano in his famous feathered white suit with rhinestone-encrusted glasses (of course), circa 1973

In fighting form at the Hammersmith Odeon in December 1973, the year Elton scored his first UK No. 1 album

ballad *Daniel*, which was kept off the top slot in the States in March 1973 by Paul McCartney & Wings' *My Love*. Superficially pleasant and mellifluous, the song was nevertheless written by Bernie Taupin about a wounded, unhappy Vietnam vet. *Don't Shoot Me…* was a solid collection, and even if it didn't exactly advance John and Taupin's compositional style, its songs became radio staples throughout 1973.

In fact, if they were fighting for air-space with anyone else, it was with John himself, because by October '73 there was another collection, this one a double: *Goodbye Yellow Brick Road*, recorded in just two weeks at the Château d'Herouville. Some argue that *Honky Château* remains his finest long-player, there are proponents for *Tumbleweed Connection* and 1975's *Captain Fantastic And The Brown Dirt Cowboy* – but there would appear to be a consensus around his seventh studio album as his zenith.

Even Elton himself said at the time, "To me *Yellow Brick* is the ultimate pop album. If you wanted to tell kids about pop music, you could play them that album, because it's got so many influences on it." Indeed, it featured the storming single *Saturday Night's Alright (For Fighting)*, the title track (a single in October), *Candle In The Wind* (the biggest-selling single of all time on its reissue in 1997 following the death of Princess Diana), the glam-anthemic *Bennie And The Jets* (originally the B-side of *Candle In The Wind*), and a miscellany of pop songs, ballads, rockers and genre novelties (including the reggae-ish *Jamaica Jerk-Off*). An elegy to Hollywood and the cinematic heroes of John and Taupin's respective youths in Middlesex and Lincolnshire, *Yellow Brick* managed the impossible and catapulted Elton onto the next level of success: it was his *Sgt. Pepper's* or *Thriller*, the album whose success (it is reputed to have sold 30 million copies) would come to define him.



Listening to the mix in the recording studio, 3rd August 1975

© Getty Images

Key Recordings

1973-76

DON'T SHOOT ME I'M ONLY THE PIANO PLAYER (1973)
At the record company's insistence, Elton and Bernie were to deliver a new album every six months. Hence the relentlessness of their release schedule: *Don't Shoot Me* was their sixth album in four years, and second recorded at the Château d'Hérouville in France. Some saw signs of a melodist and lyricist spreading themselves thin; others saw this as yet another collection of superbly produced and constructed pop-rock tunes. *Daniel* and *Crocodile Rock* were the big hits, from both ends of the John-Taupin spectrum – i.e. the ballad and rocker extremes – but there were potential other hits all over the place, from *Teacher I Need You* to *Elderberry Wine* and *I'm Going To Be A Teenage Idol*, a paean to Marc Bolan.

GOODBYE YELLOW BRICK ROAD (1973)
There was more prog ambition ahoy on this grandiose double-album, starting with the 11-minute opening track, *Funeral For A Friend/ Love Lies Bleeding*, which went from stately instrumental to exuberant pop-rocker. Then there was the funereal Marilyn Monroe tribute, *Candle In The Wind*, the faux-live clapalong *Bennie And The Jets*, the poignant title track, the explosive *Saturday Night's Alright (For Fighting)*, the audacious *Grey Seal*, the old-timey *Sweet Painted Lady*… *Goodbye Yellow Brick Road* was Elton's *White Album*, his *Sign O' The Times*, the one that demonstrated his stylistic range and his facility across a multiplicity of genres. Some argued that it would have made a cracking single album, but the point of it was its sprawling nature.

CAPTAIN FANTASTIC AND THE BROWN DIRT COWBOY (1975)
From *Bitter Fingers* ("working the pubs in Stepney") to *Someone Saved My Life Tonight*, an account of Elton's 1969 suicide attempt, this album – starring Elton as Captain Fantastic and Bernie Taupin as The Brown Dirt Cowboy – details his and Taupin's irresistible rise from the dive bars of London through John's sexual awakening and confusion to the stages of the world. It's another eclectic affair, with Philly-ish soul (*Tell Me When The Whistle Blows*, featuring strings courtesy of Barry White's orchestrator Gene Page), episodic pop-rock such as *(Gotta Get A) Meal Ticket* in the vein of The Beatles, Steely Dan-ish bossa nova shuffles (*Writing*), and a dry run for *Sorry Seems To Be The Hardest Word (We All Fall In Love Sometimes)*.

BLUE MOVES (1976)
Widely dismissed, even denigrated, at the time and subsequently – critic Robert Christgau, writing for *The Village Voice*, awarded the album a 'C' rating, describing it as "impossibly weepy" and "excessive" – *Blue Moves* is nevertheless an underrated piece of work, admired by Elton John diehards as well as by the man himself, who has claimed it as one of his favourites amongst his album catalogue. The last long-player he recorded with producer Gus Dudgeon for almost a decade, the album's strength lies in its very grandiosity – its excessiveness – and simultaneous sense of hubris and ennui. George Michael later covered the track *Tonight*, and you can see why: *Blue Moves*, a double-album, remains an overlooked trove of blue-mood music and etiolated funk, just ripe for re-exploring.

UPPERS AND DOWNERS

Not that it was downhill all the way from there. Far from it. In November '73 Elton vied with Slade and Wizzard in the Yuletide singles pantheon with *Step Into Christmas*. The following year saw the launch of his Rocket Label (early signees: Stackridge, Neil Sedaka and Kiki Dee), and high-charting singles *Candle In The Wind* and *Bennie And The Jets*.

That said, *Caribou* (June '74), his eighth album, named after the Caribou Ranch studio where part of it was recorded, was his first serious critical misfire, suggesting that the policy of recording a new album virtually every six months (due, to be fair, to record company demands) was starting to have a negative effect. Extracurricular habits, such as his narcotic misadventures and excessive drinking, were also taking their toll, as were Elton's increased weight and thinning hair. He later justified the album's comparative weakness by explaining that it was quickly recorded in January '74 in a highly pressured nine days, ahead of a Japanese tour. As for producer Gus Dudgeon, he may have had in mind the opera-goes-Eurovision knees-up *Solar Prestige A Gammon* when he fulminated that the album was "a piece of crap… the sound is the worst, the songs are nowhere, the sleeve came out wrong, the lyrics weren't that good, the singing wasn't all there, the playing wasn't great and the production is just plain lousy". The track *Stinker* may have been aptly applied to the whole project, and yet for all that *Caribou* did contain fierce rocker *The Bitch Is Back* and sumptuous ballad *Don't Let The Sun Go Down On Me*, the first single from the album in May '74, featuring Beach Boys Carl Wilson and Bruce Johnston on backing vocals.

Elton found himself unusually upstaged during this period, by the aforementioned scions of summer sunshine harmony. On 21 June '75, in an all-day concert at Wembley Stadium, he was billed as the headliner above soul troupe Rufus (fronted by Chaka Khan), quirky post-Beatles pop group Stackridge, guitar hero Joe Walsh, the new California kings of freeway rock The Eagles, and The Beach Boys. The latter blew away the 72,000-strong crowd with their back-to-back surfing and hot rod hits, and John struggled to match their good vibrations. He engaged the audience with the likes of *Rocket Man* and *Bennie And The Jets*, but he then lost them completely when he opted to play his just-released (and therefore largely unfamiliar) album *Captain Fantastic And The Brown Dirt Cowboy* in its entirety.

More rapturously received was Elton's brief collaboration with another Sixties giant, John Lennon, during a concert in New York. Elton had initially engaged the services of the erstwhile Beatle on his new cover of *Lucy In The Sky With Diamonds*, the B-side of which was Lennon's *One Day At A Time*. In return, Elton agreed to a cameo on *Whatever Gets You Thru The Night* on Lennon's *Walls And Bridges* album. Lennon, in turn, vowed to appear onstage with Elton if *Whatever Gets You…* became a US No. 1 single. It did, hence his rare appearance at Madison Square Garden on Thanksgiving Night, 28 November 1974, Lennon's last major live performance (see our feature on p112).

© Getty Images

September 1974: Elton shows off his collection of trademark sunglasses

CARIBOU WAS HIS FIRST SERIOUS CRITICAL MISFIRE, SUGGESTING THAT THE POLICY OF RECORDING A NEW ALBUM VIRTUALLY EVERY SIX MONTHS WAS STARTING TO HAVE A NEGATIVE EFFECT

LIGHT FANTASTIC

In November '74, Elton marked half a decade of hit music-making with his first *Greatest Hits*, but there was no question of resting on his laurels, because within three months he had issued the brand new single, *Philadelphia Freedom*. It was a standalone affair, not available on his ninth album, *Captain Fantastic…* (May '74). In fact, it didn't appear on an album until 1977's *Greatest Hits Volume II*. The fourth of Elton's six No. 1 US hits during the early and mid-Seventies, it found him one step ahead of his rival David Bowie. Or rather, one month: the latter's own album-length paean to Philly soul, *Young Americans*, didn't come out until March 1975, whereas the sweeping orchestral R&B of *Philadelphia Freedom* – dedicated to the symphonic soul and proto-disco sounds of producers Thom Bell (with whom John would work two years later on *The Thom Bell Sessions*) and the Kenny Gamble/Leon Huff team – appeared a full four weeks earlier.

POP_UP Progressive rock group Dream Theater recorded a cover of *Funeral For A Friend/Love Lies Bleeding* for their 1995 album *A Change Of Seasons*

Elton strums Davey Johnstone's guitar at Madison Square Garden during his Louder Than Concorde tour in 1976

© Getty Images

© Getty Images

Ever the eccentric, Elton reclines on Hollywood's Walk Of Fame, clad in a lavish star-themed three-piece suit

The *Captain Fantastic* album wasn't an album-length homage to Philly, however; rather it evinced the influence of Lennon & McCartney, from the pop-rocky title track to *Tower Of Babel*'s piano ballad that rose to a Beatlesesque crescendo. A concept album that charted John and Taupin's rise to prominence, it was a consistent set albeit one with a paucity of hits: only *Someone Saved My Life Tonight*, one of Taupin and John's greatest ballads, was issued as a single, a strange choice, perhaps, for a song with such a stark, serious storyline: it was based on the time the sexually confused singer briefly got engaged to his girlfriend, Linda Woodrow and, wracked with doubt, contemplated suicide.

SOMEONE SAVED MY LIFE TONIGHT WAS BASED ON THE TIME THE SEXUALLY CONFUSED SINGER BRIEFLY GOT ENGAGED TO HIS GIRLFRIEND AND, WRACKED WITH DOUBT, CONTEMPLATED SUICIDE

ROYAL TREATMENT

By mid-'75, Elton was, give or take Paul McCartney and Rod Stewart, the most successful British solo artist on the planet. No wonder his audiences included the stellar likes of Ringo Starr, Barbra Streisand, Diana Ross and Elizabeth Taylor, and he was privately entertaining Hollywood legends such as Mae West. In an attempt to match his extraordinary allure, he filled his stage wardrobe with jackets made of ostrich feathers, $5,000 spectacles that spelled his name in lights, and costumes that made him resemble variously the Statue Of Liberty, Donald Duck and Mozart. He received a star on the Hollywood Walk Of Fame and became one of the first white artists to appear on US TV's prestigious black music showcase *Soul Train*. He was named the outstanding rock personality of the year at the first annual Rock Music Awards held in Santa Monica, and he accompanied Princess Margaret to the film premiere of Neil Simon's *The Sunshine Boys*, having already given a private performance for the Queen Mother at her royal lodge in Windsor Great Park (he would later dance with Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II herself).

In a way, there was nowhere to go for Elton but down. Not that he ever experienced a vertiginous descent – indeed, he has been one of music's biggest names for five decades – but the mid-Seventies probably marked his peak. He released the *Island Girl* single in September '75, followed a month later by *Rock Of The Westies*, his last US No. 1 album. In 1976, he was invited by The Who's Pete Townshend to appear in the film of the rock opera *Tommy*, in which he performed a version of *Pinball Wizard*. He had his first UK No. 1 single with *Don't Go Breaking My Heart*, a duet with Kiki Dee that

Elton performs *Pinball Wizard* on the set of The Who's rock opera film *Tommy*, released on March 26, 1975

© Getty Images

topped charts all over the world and became the second biggest-selling record of the year in both the UK and US. He issued two albums in '76: the live album *Here And There* and *Blue Moves*, his 11th studio album and second double.

Despite the critical mauling it received, *Blue Moves* remains Elton's last truly great album of the decade, featuring an eclectic mix of jazz-rock fusion (*Out Of The Blue*), morose balladry (*Tonight*), prog (*One Horse Town*), and more. Despite the stinging reviews, there was little denying *Blue Moves* contained one undisputed classic in *Sorry Seems To Be The Hardest Word*, a US No. 1 hit. John himself defended the album, describing it as one of his favourites. Also of note in 1976 was Elton's admission in an interview with *Rolling Stone* that he was bisexual.

DESPITE THE CRITICAL MAULING, *BLUE MOVES* REMAINS ELTON'S LAST TRULY GREAT ALBUM OF THE DECADE WITH AN ECLECTIC MIX OF JAZZ-ROCK FUSION, MOROSE BALLADRY, PROG, AND MORE

The following year was noteworthy as the first since 1968 that he didn't release an album, just two singles from *Blue Moves* – *Bite Your Lip (Get Up And Dance!)* and *Crazy Water* – that fared only modestly. It was the year that punk broke, and perhaps sensing that he was fast becoming a man out of time, in November '77 Elton announced his retirement from performing (although he didn't stick to it for long), while Bernie Taupin began collaborating with other artists. It was the end of an era. The last two years of the decade saw John release two more albums – *A Single Man* and *Victim Of Love*, the former accompanied by a non-album single, *Ego*, that had some of the ferocity of new wave ("File next to Elvis Costello," ventured the *NME* review), and also included the hits *Part Time Love* and *Song For Guy*, a near-instrumental written for a young messenger boy who died in a motorbike crash. The latter, produced by Giorgio Moroder's musical partner Pete Bellotte, was widely slated as a belated attempt to clamber aboard the disco bandwagon. It was, however, preceded by *The Thom Bell Sessions*, an EP recorded with the Philly/"symphonic soul" producer of The Spinners, The Delfonics and The Stylistics in the second half of 1977 but not released until June '79. One of the EP tracks, *Mama Can't Buy You Love*, became a Top 40 US hit, while another, *Are You Ready For Love?*, would reach No. 1 in the UK and US on its reissue in 2003. But then, Elton, unusually for a musician who first emerged in the Sixties, had a slew of hits throughout the Eighties, Nineties and beyond. One of the few. A singular man.

POP_UP Bernie Taupin says when he saw the Robert Palmer video for *Addicted To Love*, that's what they had in mind for *Bennie And The Jets*: a smart frontman backed by robotic models

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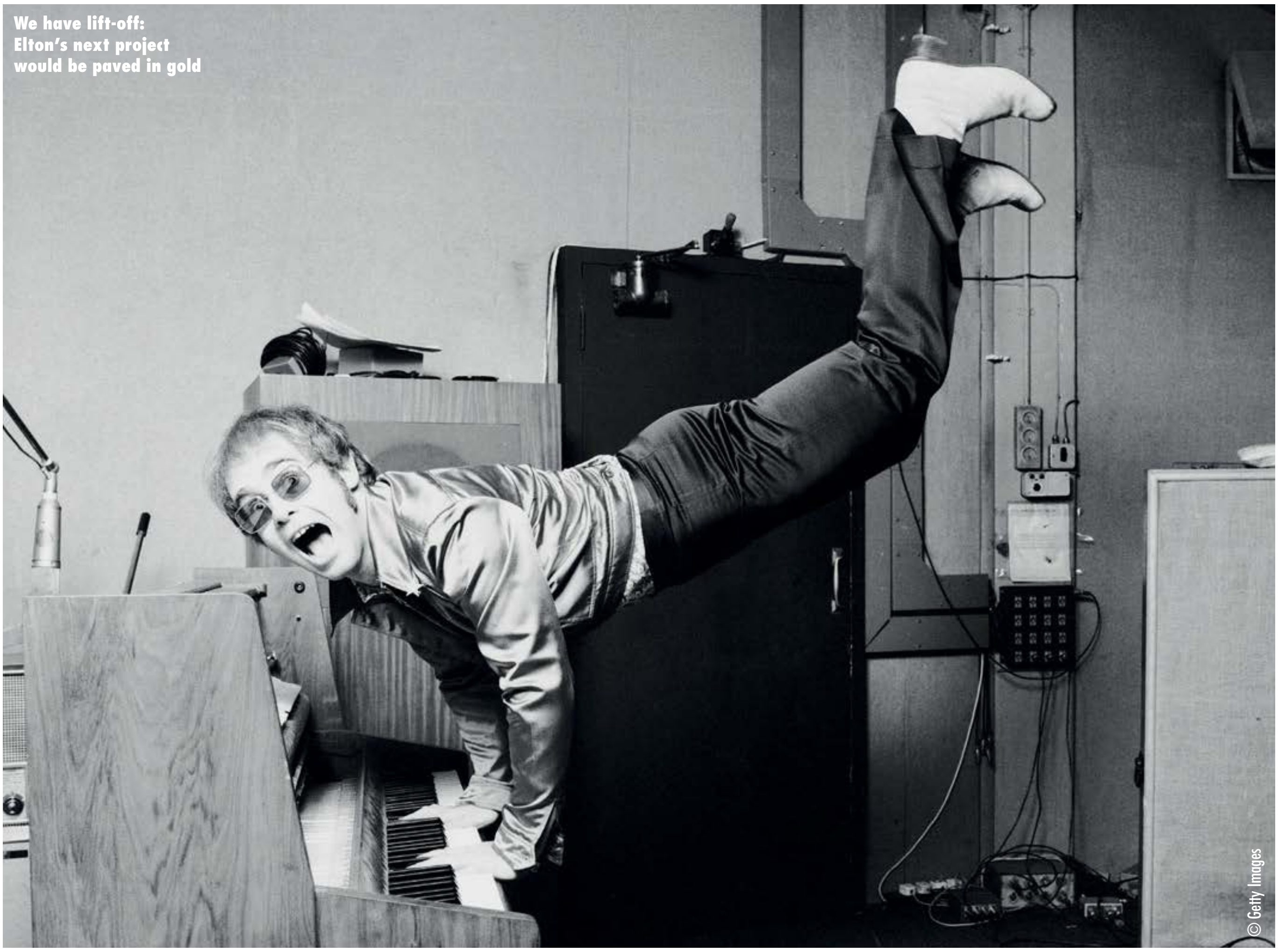
CLASSIC ALBUM

GOODBYE YELLOW BRICK ROAD

ELTON JOHN

HIS PREVIOUS SIX SOLO ALBUMS HAD BEEN QUITE SOMETHING, BUT THIS WIDESCREEN CINEMATIC TREAT SIGNALLED SOMETHING ELSE. AS BRILLIANT AS A GREATEST HITS COLLECTION, THIS FIRST DOUBLE ALBUM SHOWCASED ELTON AND BERNIE AT THE PINNACLE OF THEIR SONGWRITING TALENT...

JULIE BURNS



We have lift-off: Elton's next project would be paved in gold

© Getty Images

A strong sense of bittersweet nostalgia pervades Elton's seventh studio album. It's one of his most distinctive and diverse and, debatably, his best. Its feel encapsulates a youth misspent and gone, coupled with a love letter to Americana; a big hoorah for Hollywood culture. It may have been looking back, but in 1973, its cinematic content – from Marilyn Monroe to MGM musicals to Roy Rogers – was very much in with the Seventies vogue for paying tribute to retro Tinseltown.

As Bernie Taupin explained of his inspiration: "Like any other child in my generation in England, I grew up on American music, American movies and American television". Elton more recently summed up its appeal to *Rolling Stone*: "The naivete is the most pleasant thing about the record, probably." It obviously struck a wide chord: the album went on to sell in excess of 30 million copies, and in 2003 was inducted into the Grammy Hall of Fame.

A creative project where teething problems somehow transformed into artistic near-perfection, *Goodbye Yellow Brick Road* was once again recorded at the Chateau d'Hérouville's Strawberry Studios, the original location of Jamaica having been abandoned. The Rolling Stones' had recently had a great experience in Jamaica, recording *Goat's Head Soup*, but for Elton and crew it was a non-starter from the January 1973 get-go. From having to cross a barbed wire, armed-guarded picket line into the studio, to "abysmal" equipment, to hostile locals thanks to brewing economic tension. On top of which, clashes broke out following a Joe Frazier and George Foreman boxing match in their Kingston locality. The Jamaica debacle would inspire tongue-in-cheek track seven, *Jamaica Jerk-Off,* while lost time had to be made up, with every moment counting. Songs were mostly made up on the day they were recorded with Bernie writing and Elton composing music at the breakfast table before the musicians jumped in. But the team – with the core band comprising bassist Dee Murray, drummer Nigel Olsson and guitarist Davey Johnstone, all overseen by producer Gus Dudgeon – was lethally tight through touring.

> The move to France proved a great catalyst. In two weeks flat, the sessions yielded an embarrassment of recorded riches. Far exceeding the single album planned, *Goodbye Yellow Brick Road* would become Elton's first double album

FRENCH CONNECTION

It was a case of third time lucky at the 'Honky Chateau' – the familiar scene of some of Elton's previous recordings, including his most recent top-charting album *Don't Shoot Me I'm Only The Piano Player* – plus the chosen studio for other glittering pop alumni including the Bee Gees, Fleetwood Mac, Marvin Gaye, T-Rex, Iggy Pop and David Bowie. The move to France proved to be a great catalyst. In two weeks flat, the sessions yielded an embarrassment of recorded riches: *Funeral For A Friend/ Love Lies Bleeding*, *Harmony*, and a string of hits: *Candle In The Wind, Bennie And The Jets, Goodbye Yellow Brick Road, Saturday Night's Alright For Fighting*. Far exceeding the single album planned, it would become Elton's first double album.

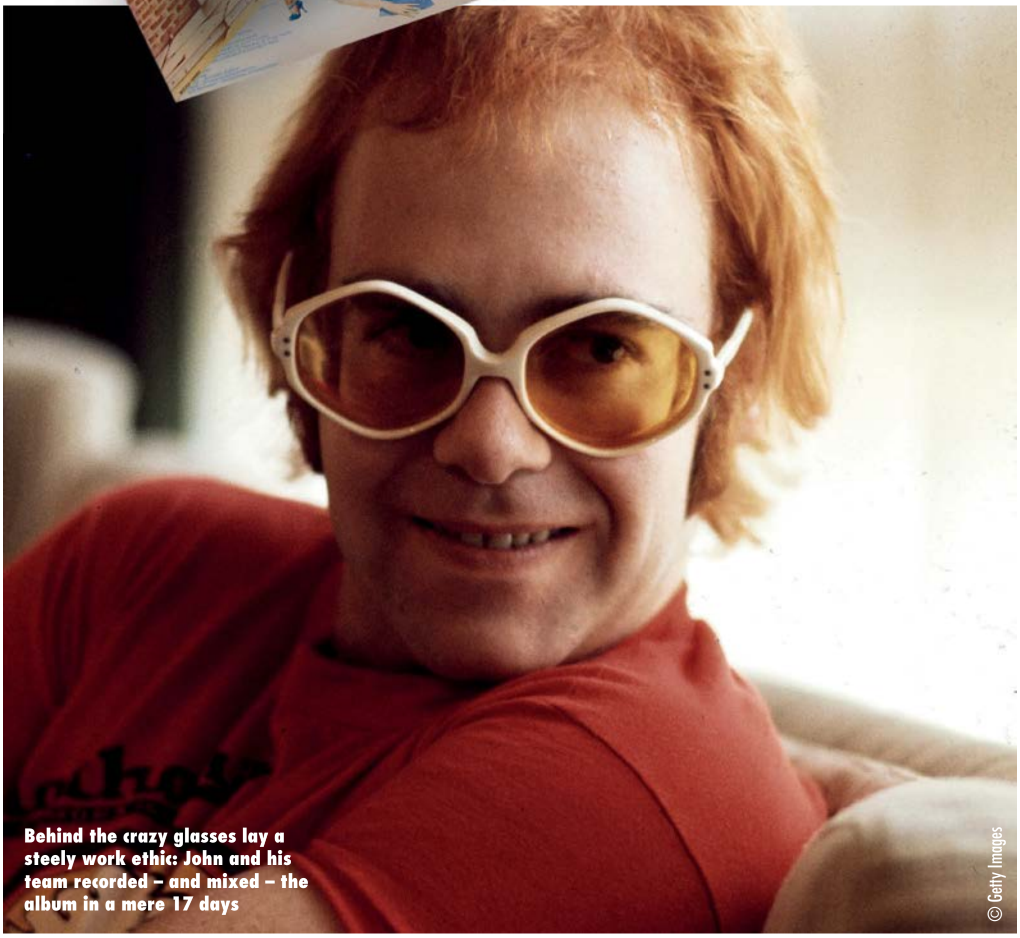
COVER STORY

THEY NEEDED SOME ARTWORK – BUT TIME WAS RUNNING OUT

The iconic three-panel design cover art of *Goodbye Yellow Brick Road* was by illustrator Ian Beck, hired on the strength of his work on the Jonathan Kelly LP *Wait Till They Change The Backdrop*. Beck was very surprised to be asked by Rocket Records if he wanted to sell the exact same artwork for reuse; instead, he supplied a fresh concept based on a similar theme. Kelly's album had featured three dancers and a stagehand lowering – or raising – an "industrial" scene over a rural one. Perhaps signifying moving on in terms of life and style, Elton is depicted sporting platform-soled ruby red slippers and peeling back the album cover from *Don't Shoot Me…* to step into a poster, from an urban brick wall into a country idyll, complete with yellow brick road. The album's release date had been set when the original recording sessions were scheduled for January 1973. Instead, following the Jamaican glitch, it was not technically recorded until May, therefore compacting post-production to stressful levels.

Happily, Ian Beck came up with the goods. As co-art director David Larkham concluded in a 2014 interview to EltonJohn.com on the album's 40th anniversary: "An art school mantra is Form, Fashion and Function, and great album cover art will follow what is fashionable in music and pop culture, while at the same time setting their own trends and visual legends in their own right."

Artist Ian Beck drew up the entire cover concept in one weekend



Behind the crazy glasses lay a steely work ethic: John and his team recorded – and mixed – the album in a mere 17 days

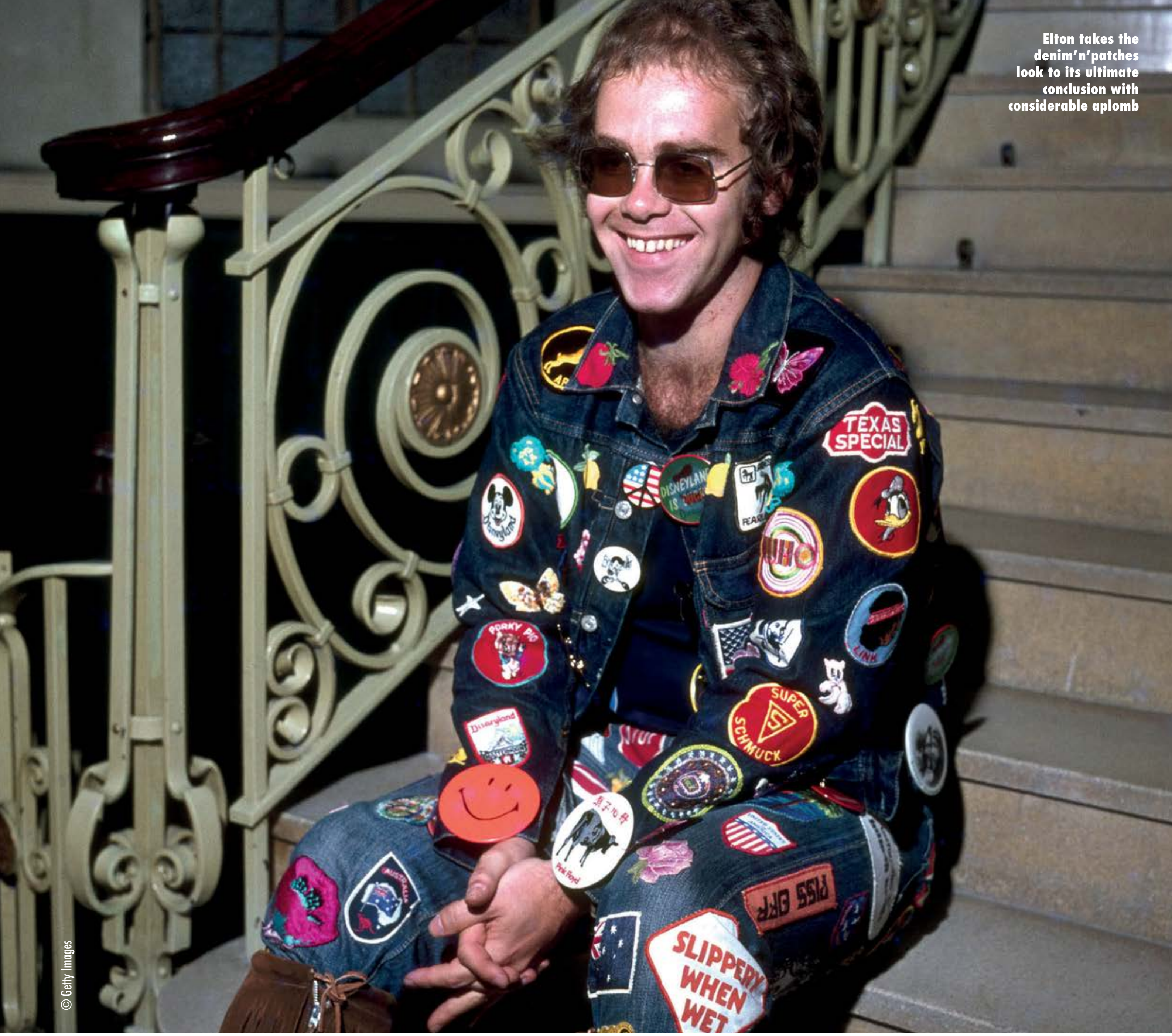
© Getty Images

The album was apparently envisaged under the working titles of *Vodka And Tonics* and *Silent Movies, Talking Pictures*, and some great stories lay behind the hits.

RASEN HELL

The first single release *Saturday Night's Alright For Fighting* was particularly personal to Bernie, being a nod to his testosterone-fuelled teenage years back in Britain and, more specifically, triggered by his experiences of Saturday night "action" – or fisticuffs – at the Aston Arms pub in Market Rasen, Lincolnshire, where he would go to play snooker and have an underage pint with his mates. The venue – still a functioning pub – remains recognisable today from its liner note image on 1975's *Captain Fantastic And The Brown Dirt Cowboy*.

Saturday Night's Alright For Fighting kicks in from the off: "It's seven o'clock and I wanna rock/ Gotta get my belly full



Elton takes the denim'n'patches look to its ultimate conclusion with considerable aplomb

© Getty Images

of beer". As one wag later remarked, it could have been written for a rumble scene in a film like *The Outsiders*, and was light years away from Elton's altogether more mellow reputation. The song even initially got banned from some stations for fear of inciting riots, and no wonder, with *A Clockwork Orange*-like lines like "A couple of sounds that I really like/ Are the sounds of a switchblade and a motorbike/ I'm the juvenile product of the working class/ Whose best friend floats in the bottom of a glass…"

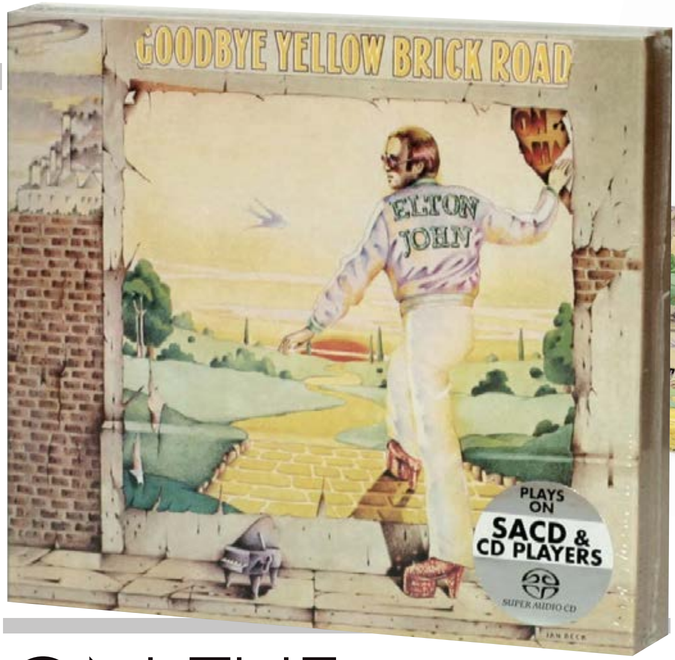
This blast of a track showcases Elton's firecracker fingers along with Davey Johnstone's incendiary guitar playing, but it was a song that the singer admitted had been "hard to record". Contrary to his usual creative process, the piano part was not recorded first, nor did he play along with the band in the studio; instead he overdubbed his part on top of the otherwise completed multi-track. *Saturday Night* remained a solid favourite in Elton's repertoire, becoming one of his top 10 most performed songs.

The song *Goodbye Yellow Brick Road* could be seen as a marker of the chalk-and-cheese-like Bernie/Elton relationship: by '73 Elton was enjoying being ensconced in the high life, while Bernie preferred to remain more grounded

NATURE CALLS

If *Saturday Night* got off to a great start, as the second single, title track *Goodbye Yellow Brick Road* easily surpassed it, and was a sure-fire Top 10 hit, both UK and Stateside. The yellow brick road was, of course, a key theme of *The Wizard Of Oz*, the fantastical 1939 film that as a boy greatly affected Bernie Taupin. In it, Dorothy and her friends are told to follow the yellow brick road to find the wizard of their wishes, yet along the way, they each find what they were looking for all along. Likewise, Bernie's lyrics expressed a desire to give up the rock-star trappings, the penthouse type opulence and "get back to roots"; as his alter-ego sang, he's found his true future beyond the yellow brick road of shallow fame and fortune. It could be seen as a marker of the Bernie/ Elton chalk-and-cheese-like relationship: already, by '73, Elton was enjoying being ensconced in the high life, while Bernie preferred to remain more grounded.

The mood changes again for *Bennie And The Jets* –



Above: the Super Deluxe edition added live CDs, a 100-page book, Bryan Forbes' "making of" *GYBR* documentary from 1973 and more

ON THE ROAD AGAIN

HAPPY 30TH AND 40TH ANNIVERSARY

Honouring the original format, the 30th anniversary edition of *Goodbye Yellow Brick Road* was a double-disc special to allow the inclusion of bonus tracks *Whenever You're Ready (We'll Go Steady Again), Jack Rabbit, Screw You (Young Man's Blues)* and the mellowest 2003 Greg Penny acoustic remix of *Candle In The Wind*. A DVD on the making of the album was an inspired bonus, and the package was released on SACD (in 2003), DVD-Audio (2004), and Blu-ray Audio (2014).

Fast-forward 10 years to 2014's 40th Anniversary deluxe edition, *Goodbye Yellow Brick Road: Revisited & Beyond*, and there's an atmospheric five-strong live platter from the Hammersmith Odeon in 1973 served on top: *Rocket Man, Daniel, Honky Cat, Crocodile Rock* and *Your Song*. Disc 2 also features a contemporary guest twist, possibly the best cuts of which are Ed Sheeran's take on *Candle In The Wind*; Emile Sandé on *All The Girls Love Alice*; and feisty Imelda May on *Your Sister Can't Twist (But She Can Rock'n'Roll)*. Upgrade again, and the super-deluxe edition the same year proves the ultimate showstopper: three additional discs bringing fans the 1973 *Live At Hammersmith Odeon* show special, with disc five being the DVD finale – *Elton John & Bernie Taupin Say Goodbye to Norma Jean And Other Things*.

as spelled on the album vinyl disc label – or *Benny And The Jets*, as on its track listing and single sleeve. To Elton's amazement, following airplay across Canada and the US, it peaked at No. 1 on the US singles chart in '74, going on to sell some 2.8 million copies by the sizzling summer of '76. Not bad for a track the singer had been underwhelmed by – indeed, he found the end result "weird".

Much to his annoyance, MCA were dying to release it, and could only persuade Motown fan Elton to U-turn on hearing that the song had gone to the top of the charts in Detroit – meaning an all-important crossover into the R&B market was in the offing. Elton was duly pleased to go on to perform it on the *Soul Train show* – one of the few white performers to appear.

In this wry satire on the Seventies music industry, Bernie tells the tale of an outrageous fictional female glam-rock band and their worshipful fans, poking fun at both sides of this new music religion – the awe-inspiring entertainers, and their transfixed crowd. As Bernie told *Esquire* magazine: "*Bennie And The Jets* was almost Orwellian – it was supposed to be futurist. They were supposed to be a prototypical female rock'n'roll band out of science fiction – automatons." Inadvertently or not, Elton underlines the robotic feel with his stuttering vocal "B-B-B-Bennie…" allied to a falsetto in the manner of Frankie Valli (whom Elton had seen in concert, and admired). The lyrics were further inspired by films, comic books, and the naughty work of German fashion photographer Helmut Newton. Some critics interpreted the song's main character, Bennie, as a reference to Benzedrine, with the "Jets" referencing amphetamine, aka speed. In the final mix to heighten the effect, producer Gus Dudgeon added a recording of applause and audience sounds, whistles and claps from a concert Elton played in London in 1972.

Interestingly, an actual group called Bennie And The Jets played in the Detroit area for years. They formed prior to the song being a hit, and were the subject of a copyright writ from

The lyricist and the tunesmith; *Goodbye Yellow Brick Road* is one of the great double albums

© Getty Images

1973, and Elton is in a pugnacious mood before a hometown audience at the Hammersmith Odeon

© Getty Images

THE PLAYERS

RELEASED October 1973

LABEL MCA (US)/ DJM (UK)

PRODUCED BY Gus Dudgeon

ENGINEERS David Hentschel with assistance from Peter Kelsey and Andy Scott

RECORDED AT Chateau d'Hérouville, France

PERSONNEL Elton John – vocals, piano, electric piano, organ, Farfisa organ, tack piano, Mellotron

ADDITIONAL MUSICIANS

Davey Johnstone – electric and acoustic guitars, slide and steel guitars, banjo, vocals
Dee Murray – bass, vocals
Nigel Olsson – drums, congas, tambourine, vocals
Del Newman – various orchestral arrangements
Leroy Gómez – saxophone
David Hentschel – ARP synth
Kiki Dee – backing vocals
Ray Cooper – tambourine

Elton around the time of his song charting until they proved their prior existence. Meanwhile, an intriguing fan theory involves Frank Zappa's 1968 album, *(Cruising with) Ruben & The Jets* – about an eponymous fictional Fifties band. In Zappa's yarn about the cover band, one of Ruben's dogs was called Benny. Creative coincidence, or not? Though it never mustered a mention from Elton or Bernie, it's strange that neither had heard of this sometime in the five years before their own "spoof".

EVERLASTING CANDLE

With its rock opera feel and music box piano, the album opener – the goosebump-inducing, 10-minute epic *Funeral For A Friend/Love Lies Bleeding* – would become a strong fan favourite. Next comes the incandescent *Candle In The Wind*, now eclipsed in sales terms at least by its '97 incarnation in tribute to Princess Diana, which sold 10 million plus in the US alone. The original, however, had been penned in sympathetic salute to another global icon and blonde who had also died aged 36, Marilyn Monroe (birth name Norma Jean Mortenson, hence "Goodbye Norma Jean"). Bernie Taupin had actually first heard the phrase "candle in the wind" in relation to singer Janis Joplin, but chose instead to pin the lyric on "more sympathetic" screen star Marilyn and her troubled, too-short life. Though professing respect for Marilyn, he later claimed the song could have equally been about James Dean, Montgomery Clift, Jim Morrison, Kurt Cobain, even tragic writers Sylvia Plath or Virginia Woolf. His intention, Bernie said, was more about "the idea of fame or youth or somebody being cut short in the prime of their life… how we glamorise death, how we immortalise people". Elton, however, a huge Marilyn fan, immediately empathised with the use of Monroe as the muse and with Bernie's achingly apt, heartfelt lyrics.

> Bernie Taupin had actually first heard the phrase "candle in the wind" in relation to singer Janis Joplin, but chose instead to pin the lyrics on the "more sympathetic" screen star Marilyn Monroe and her troubled, too-short life

The famous "singing cowboy" Roy Rogers was idolised by millions and has been cited by both Elton and Bernie as a childhood hero. The track of the same name follows the album's recurrent cinematic theme, and Elton's elastic vocals sound folksy and Americanised in this strings-rich singalong. Then there's the noir-ish *The Ballad of Danny Bailey*, about a bad-ass bootlegger, and the emotionally-charged young-lesbian-dying-in-the -streets tale *All the Girls Love Alice* (with a muted Kiki Dee on backing vocals). Then there's the upbeat *Grey Seal* and the mellifluous *Harmony* (with unparalleled harmonies here and throughout courtesy of Nigel, Davey and Dee), and the hyper jive-rhythm of *Your Sister Can't Twist* (like a lysergic version of *Crocodile Rock*). It all adds up to a pick'n'mix chocolate box – a something-for-everyone collection of tones, tempos and styles, all smoothly reflective of Elton's love of all kind of music, from classical to rock, R&B to reggae. It's hard to envisage a more complete Seventies album.

In the US the album was certified gold by October '73. After 20 years, it had gone five times platinum; by 2014, an amazing eight times platinum. It's ranked 91 on *Rolling Stone*'s list of the 500 greatest albums – but more importantly, both Elton and Bernie agree it represents the excitement of their own youth, the height of their combined creative prowess. ■

Elton in a rather marvellous Statue Of Liberty costume for a photo session around 1980 in New York City

© Getty Images

CAPTAIN AMERICA

ELTON ENTERED THE EIGHTIES IN SOMETHING OF A PARLOUS STATE. A VARIETY OF ADDICTIONS WERE TAKING HOLD AND HIS SALES – ESPECIALLY IN THE STATES, WHERE FIVE YEARS PREVIOUSLY HE HAD BEEN THE BIGGEST STAR IN THE WORLD – HAD DROPPED OFF. WITHOUT HIS OLD PARTNERS IN CRIME AROUND HIM, THE MUSIC ITSELF WAS STARTING TO SUFFER AND IT'S AMAZING HE MANAGED TO SURVIVE THE DECADE AT ALL…

IAN WADE

May 1980 saw the release of Elton's 14th studio album and his 21st official release, the self-explanatorily entitled *21 At 33*. Recorded at Super Bear Studios in Nice in France, in August 1979, and also Rumbo Recorders and Sunset Sound in Los Angeles, California between January to March 1980, and produced by Clive Franks and Elton John, it saw him reunited with Bernie Taupin for the first time since *Captain Fantastic* on three songs – *Chasing The Crown, Two Rooms At The End Of The World* and *White Lady White Powder* – which carried on in the disco stylings Elton had explored on the previous *Victim Of Love* album. However, the pick of the album were the tracks he wrote with *Victim Of Love* and *Single Man* collaborator Gary Osborne – *Dear God, Take Me Back* and the stand-out *Little Jeannie*. It also marked a slight return for drummer Nigel Olsson and bass player Dee Murray on one song, as well as keyboardist James Newton Howard. These were the only nods to his past, though, as other musicians on the album including members of the Eagles and Toto as well as Peter Noone from Herman's Hermits.

ELTON'S 14TH SOLO ALBUM *21 AT 33* SAW HIM REUNITED WITH BERNIE TAUPIN ON THREE SONGS. HOWEVER, THE PICK OF THE ALBUM WERE THE TRACKS HE WROTE WITH GARY OSBORNE

The 2000 animated feature *The Road To Eldorado* had been developed by the DreamWorks studio, and hopes were high that the caper would deal Disney – home of *The Lion King* – a bloody nose. It was inevitable the producers would court Elton for the soundtrack and so, alongside the score from John Powell and Hans Zimmer – who had also worked on

© Getty Images

Elton played a huge block of dates – a nerve-shattering 16 in a row – at the Hammersmith Odeon in December 1982

Elton at Shepperton Studios near London on 1 June 1981 filming some promo footage for his album *The Fox*

© Getty Images

the African-inspired smash – he and Tim Rice reunited to create 11 new songs, of which two were lifted as singles. The album did moderate business, but the film mirrored the soundtrack's modest fortunes, failing to pay back its reported budget on its domestic release.

Elton's pick for the lead single, *Someday Out Of The Blue*, co-written with Madonna collaborator Patrick Leonard, was a sizeable adult-contemporary hit Stateside, peaking at No. 5 and also securing a scattering of modest European chart entries. A second single, *Friends Never Can Say Goodbye*, featuring uncredited vocals from Backstreet Boys (who lost their billing due to label politics) later peaked at No. 21 in the same listings. Reviews for the project were mixed and the soundtrack remains largely overlooked, while a contribution to US band Collective Soul's album in the form of a track called *Perfect Day* also passed most by the same year.

Nevertheless the album sold substantially better than its predecessor, thanks to the success of *Little Jeannie* as a single in the US and also the Tom Robinson co-write *Sartorial Eloquence*, reaching within sniffing distance of the Top 10 album chart positions of No. 12 (UK) and No. 13 (US).

Tom Robinson also helped out with a composition called *Elton's Song* – a vital one in terms of its clearly "out" subject matter – on Elton's next album, *The Fox*, released in May 1981 (although it had been recorded across 1979 and 1980). *The Fox* was also released as a full video album, with films for all the tracks – and this was a good few months before what has often been lauded as "the first video album", *Word Of Mouth* by Toni Basil, came along. Unfortunately, none of this really helped, and *The Fox* turned out to be Elton's first album not to contain a Top 40 single since his debut.

The Fox itself, despite keeping with a similar cast list of supporting musicians and writers, became one of Elton's poorest-selling albums in the US, but it did see the start of a working relationship with producer Chris Thomas, who'd be at the helm for much of Elton's Eighties and Nineties output. His biggest single of the year ended up being a reissue of his *I Saw Her Standing There* duet with John Lennon, released by DJM as a tribute to the then-recently deceased Beatle.

JOHN LENNON LOOMED LARGE ON *JUMP UP!* ELTON DIDN'T FEEL A SONG ABOUT HIS FRIEND WOULD BE APPROPRIATE UNTIL HE SAW BERNIE TAUPIN'S CLEVER, ALLUSIVE LYRIC

SIDEWAYS JUMP

John Lennon also loomed large on his next album, *Jump Up!*, in April 1982, and first full Elton album to be written and recorded during the decade. The key track, however, was the Lennon tribute *Empty Garden (Hey Hey Johnny)*. Elton had said that he didn't feel like a song about his friend – and he was godfather to Sean Lennon – would be appropriate, and claimed it would be "clumsy" until he saw Taupin's clever, allusive lyric.

The album featured a slimmer array of personnel than previous ones, with guests such as The Who's Pete Townshend on *Ball And Chain*, and Tim Rice

POP_UP Elton co-hosted an episode of *Top Of The Pops* with DJ Peter Powell in August 1980, with a show featuring Abba, Diana Ross, Kelly Marie, Odyssey and a dance routine from Legs & Co

LOSING CONTROL

KEY ALBUMS **1980-1989**

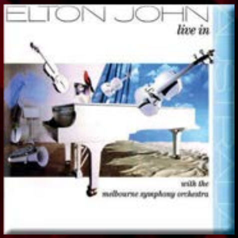
TWO LOW FOR ZERO (1983)

By the time it came around to making the follow-up to *Jump Up!*, *Too Low For Zero*, Bernie insisted that Elton should return to basics and put him in charge of all the lyrics again. Elton would also reconvene with his full classic band line-up, who'd last been all together on the *Captain Fantastic* album and tour in 1975. There was also room for Skailia Kanga, who'd played harp on his self-titled and *Tumbleweed Connection* albums. It would also be the first time since *A Single Man* that Elton decided to play synthesisers as well as piano, allowing him to sound a bit rockier where needed. Spawning five singles – *I Guess That's Why They Call It The Blues*, *I'm Still Standing*, *Cold As Christmas*, *Kiss The Bride* and the title track – it became his biggest-selling album of the Eighties on both sides of the Atlantic.

ICE ON FIRE (1985)

Ice On Fire came out in November 1985, and while it was his highest-charting album in the UK for a decade, it only managed a paltry No. 48 in the US. It was his most guest-heavy album yet, featuring contributions from George Michael, Millie Jackson, Nik Kershaw, Kiki Dee, Queen's Roger Taylor and John Deacon, and Sister Sledge.

The singles released from the album fared far better, with *Nikita* especially doing well, its memorable Ken Russell video featuring Elton sitting in his Bentley mooning over a border guard, and giving Elton a top three hit in the UK and even the No. 1 slot across much of Europe that Christmas. The follow-up *Wrap Her Up*, with George Michael on "painful falsetto" was very much of its time. The closing track *Shoot Down The Moon* had been considered for the James Bond film *A View To A Kill*, but the producers went with that pesky Duran Duran instead.



LIVE IN AUSTRALIA WITH THE MELBOURNE SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA (1987)

Elton's Tour De Force of Australia with the 88-piece Melbourne Symphony Orchestra was the first venture of its kind to be undertaken by a rock star. It culminated with 11 nights at the Sydney Entertainment Centre, the last of which was broadcast on Australian TV and would be released as the *Live In Australia* album and video. The tour would prove to be something of a "one last time" for many facets of Elton – his costumes, his wigs, and even his voice, as he was admitted for surgery a couple of weeks later. The music was arranged by James Newton Howard, who'd previously arranged strings for Elton compositions back at the turn of the Eighties. In 1986 he was an up-and-coming film composer, and wrote all new parts for a bigger orchestra. While not a massive seller at the time, it eventually achieved platinum status in 1995.

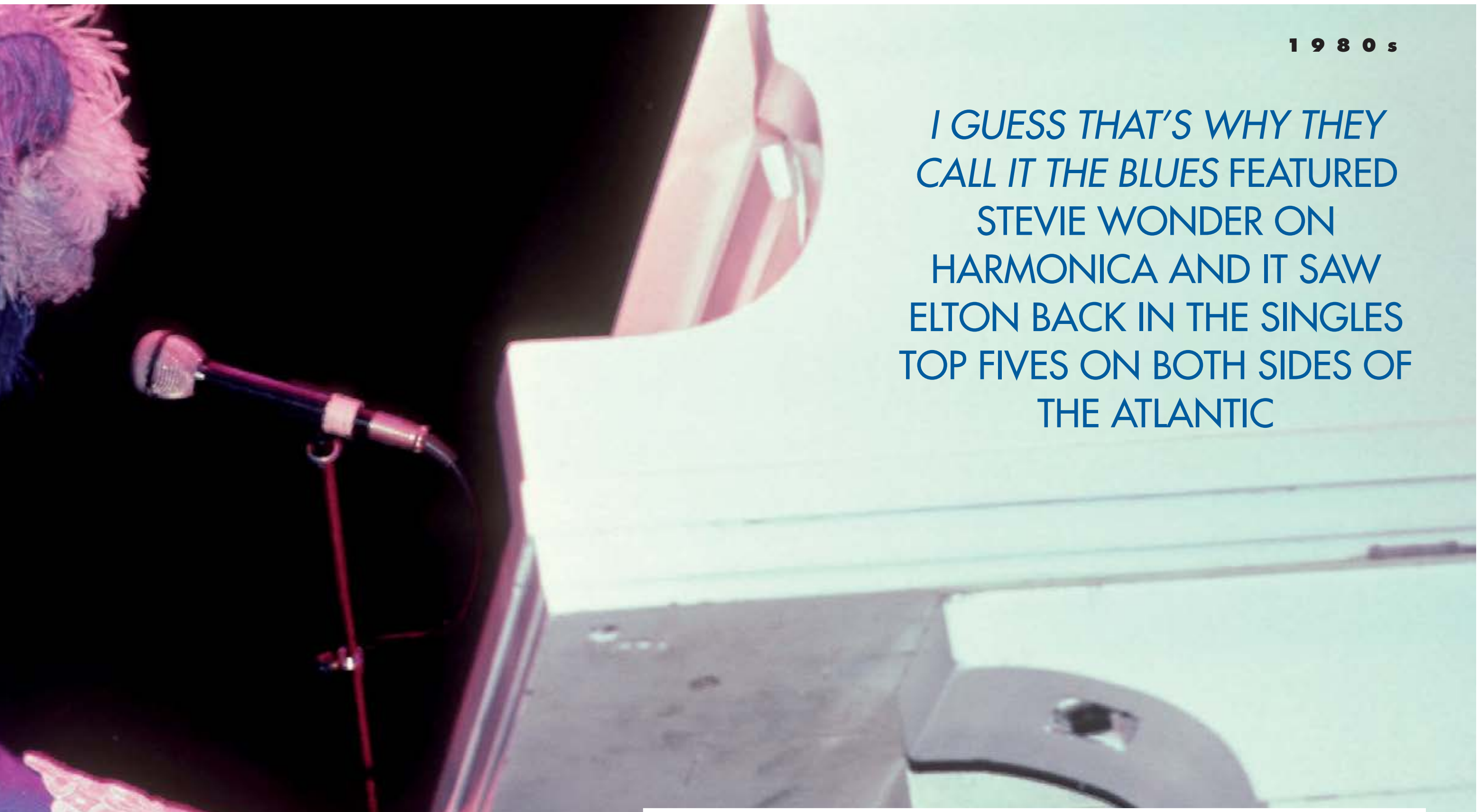
SLEEPING WITH THE PAST (1989)

For Elton's 22nd album, he and Bernie decided to pay homage to some of their musical influences and inspirations from the Sixties and the Seventies, and Seventies soul and R&B in particular. When they wrote the songs, each one offered a record or artist as a reference point. A slow-burning hit, the album eventually spent five weeks at No. 1 in June 1990, helped by Elton's first solo No. 1, *Sacrifice/Healing Hands*. Overall, the project was a precursor of better times to come. Elton reckoned that *Sleeping With The Past* was "the strongest record we've ever made", saying that "we went back to our roots and tried to do something special. Bernie and I came up with the idea of making an album that paid tribute to all the great old soul songs we'd grown up with, and I feel that also gives it a real sense of continuity." He also pointed out that "It was the last album before rehab… but it was a good album."

Elton in his full pomp at what was now almost his second American home, Madison Square Garden in New York

– with whom he'd worked on *The Lion King* – on a co-write called *Legal Boys*. A return to form was promised with the next album's first single, *Blue Eyes*, when that put Elton back in the Top 10 for the first time in five years, but *Jump Up!* is definitely not without its critics. Even Bernie Taupin, speaking in a radio interview, dismissed it as "one of our worst albums". He added, "It's a terrible, awful, disposable album… but it had *Empty Garden* on it, so it's worth it for that one song."

It's telling that only *Blue Eyes* and *Empty Garden* have remained in Elton's live sets from this period, and despite the increase of interest in the singer thanks to *Blue Eyes*, the album only managed No. 13 in the UK and No. 17 in the US. Elton set off on a worldwide tour, now with Davey back on board, in March 1982, travelling through the US, Australia and Europe. In New York, he spent three nights at Madison Square Garden, with one show attended by Yoko and Sean Lennon; this was where *Empty Garden* was performed live for the first time. Taking three months off to record his 17th album, the tour resumed in the UK, with a whopping 16 nights at Hammersmith taking him to a Christmas Eve finale.



I GUESS THAT'S WHY THEY CALL IT THE BLUES FEATURED STEVIE WONDER ON HARMONICA AND IT SAW ELTON BACK IN THE SINGLES TOP FIVES ON BOTH SIDES OF THE ATLANTIC

Bernie Taupin and Elton John backstage at Madison Square Garden during the *Jump Up!* tour, August 1982

© Getty Images

HAPPY WITH THE BLUES

As 1983 gallivanted into being, Elton begun work on his next album, *Too Low For Zero*. While Chris Thomas remained as producer, much of the album was recorded at AIR Studios in Montserrat (the same studio that had been used for *Jump Up!*) and Sunset Sound Recorders in Hollywood. For Elton, it was like old times again, writing and recording the album at considerable speed in no more than a fortnight.

The omens were looking good. The first single, *I Guess That's Why They Call It The Blues*, featured Stevie Wonder guesting on harmonica, and it saw Elton back in the singles top fives on both sides of the Atlantic. The album followed a month later and brought him back into the Top 10 in the UK, and while it only reached No. 25 in the US, it hung around long enough to sell over a million copies. It was the first time he'd broken the platinum-selling barrier in America in several years.

However, it was the second single that would help propel Elton properly back into the hierarchy of pop. While various artists of his era were struggling to adapt to the Eighties – David Bowie and Rod Stewart would still have No. 1 singles in 1983, but they were for not particularly vintage tracks – it was the accompanying video to *I'm Still Standing* that thrust Elton firmly into the MTV age.

Another three singles – *Kiss The Bride, Cold As Christmas* and the title track – were mined off the album to prolong its success, and helping to make it Elton's biggest-selling long-player of the decade.

Despite the success of the album, Elton was off the road for much of 1983, and the band's only performances in that year were seven shows that took place at the controversial Sun City casino complex near Johannesburg in South Africa from October 7-15. Breaking the cultural boycott led to

Elton and Renate after their wedding in Sydney on St Valentine's Day

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Elton in an imposing outfit in 1985, around the time of *Ice And Fire*

© Getty Images

condemnation being heaped upon Elton from fellow artists for playing the resort during South Africa's apartheid era.

By the end of 1983, Elton had reconvened in Montserrat to begin work on his next album with Davey Johnstone, Dee Murray and Nigel Olsson. High on the success of *Too Low For Zero*, among other things, Elton recorded his 18th album, *Breaking Hearts*, between Montserrat and AIR studios with Chris Thomas, aided again by German recording engineer Renate Blauel. She had been present at the previous album's sessions and had a reputation for being very thorough and reliable. Elton had come to rely on her presence when he'd re-record vocal takes – as was the case back then – for *Top Of The Pops* performances. Indeed, Elton didn't initially want to go out to Montserrat unless she was going out there too. When he began a tour in Sydney later in January 1984, while the rest of the band were in the bar, Elton and Renate had gone out to dinner. On their return to the hotel, Dee Murray recalls seeing them in the doorway, holding hands. "Guess what, man," said Elton, "I'm engaged."

The wedding, on Valentine's Day 1984, took place in the Anglican church of St Mark's in the Darling Point area of Sydney. Traditionally, according to New South Wales law, people wishing to be wed would have to apply for a marriage license and wait for 30 days. Due to his touring schedule, Elton managed to be granted with a special waiver that allowed the ceremony to go ahead.

Elton went on to tour Europe that spring and played three concerts in Poland, where he met and took tea with the Solidarity leader Lech Walesa. He also had his hands full back at the Watford ground, where it looked like they were in with a chance of an FA cup, managing to make the final up against Everton.

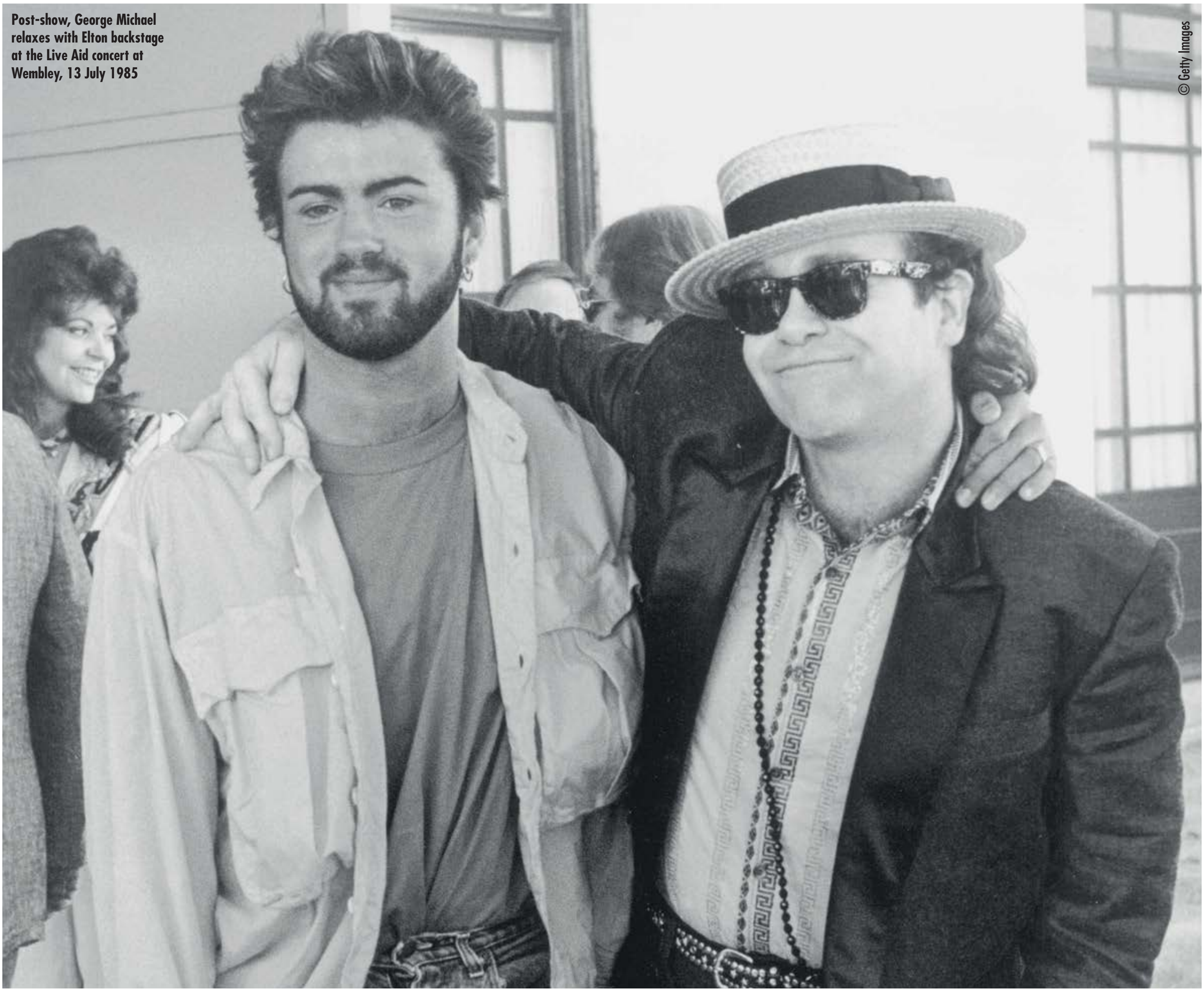
ELTON AND RENATE WENT OFF FOR DINNER. ON THEIR RETURN, DEE MURRAY RECALLS SEEING THEM IN THE DOORWAY, HOLDING HANDS. "GUESS WHAT, MAN," SAID ELTON, "I'M ENGAGED"

MATTERS OF THE HEART

Almost as an afterthought to all the hubbub surrounding Elton's personal life, *Breaking Hearts* came out that June, preceded by the Top 10 hit *Sad Songs Say So Much*. A No. 2 in the UK, it fared a bit better than its predecessor in the US by reaching No. 20 – although again in the US, it would go on to eventually sell a million. Elton's hit streak continued with the single *Passengers*, a Davey Johnstone co-write, as well as further hits with the tracks *Who Wears These Shoes, In Neon* and the title track, *Breaking Hearts*.

1985 began quietly enough, with Elton back in the studio working on his next album at Sol Studios in Berkshire, a facility which Gus Dudgeon – who was back in the producer's chair for the first time since *Blue Moves* – had built in the early Eighties.

POP_UP Ever the collaborator, Elton popped on the 1986 album *Rock The Nations* by British New Wave Metallers Saxon, playing on two tracks – *Northern Lady* and the charmingly-titled *Party 'Til You Puke*



Post-show, George Michael relaxes with Elton backstage at the Live Aid concert at Wembley, 13 July 1985

© Getty Images

In July, as Elton was putting the finishing touches to what would become *Ice On Fire*, he appeared as part of Live Aid. Introduced by Billy Connolly, who suggested that 95 percent of the world was watching on TV, Elton filled his allocated 21 minutes with six songs: *I'm Still Standing, Bennie And The Jets, Rocket Man, Don't Go Breaking My Heart* with Kiki Dee, *Don't Let The Sun Go Down On Me* with George Michael and Andrew Ridgeley, and a cover of Marvin Gaye's *Can I Get A Witness*. In November Elton released *Ice On Fire* and toured in support of the album, beginning in Dublin and continuing across the British Isles, including nine nights in a row at Wembley Arena, and finishing in Belfast in January.

Throughout 1985 Elton would be involved in a legal battle against his old mentor Dick James in a bid to get a greater share of royalties and ownership of his work for the DJM label. DJM were forced to make up the difference on royalties and adjust his rate retroactively. Seeing that Elton was one of the biggest-selling artists on the planet during his time on DJM, that would prove to be quite a windfall. It took its toll on Dick James, though, and he suffered a heart attack at his home in February 1986, dying before he reached the hospital. This distressed Elton, who ordered his lawyers to agree a settlement. Elton also decided to meet James' legal costs.

THE LEAD SINGLE FROM THE *LEATHER JACKET* ALBUM, *HEARTACHE ALL OVER THE WORLD*, HAS SINCE BEEN DISMISSED BY ELTON AND BERNIE AS THE WORST SONG THEY EVER RECORDED

FRIENDS FOR AIDS

As 1986 came into view, Elton was enjoying a No. 1 single as part of a collaboration with Dionne Warwick that featured Gladys Knight and Stevie Wonder, as Dionne & Friends on a cover of the Burt Bacharach and Carole Bayer Sager song *That's What Friends Are For*. Recorded as a benefit for the American Foundation for AIDS Research, the single reached No. 1 in the US, raising more than $3 million, and won the performers the Grammy for Best Pop Performance by a Duo or Group with Vocals, as

POP_UP One of Elton's key friendships forged in the Eighties was with George Michael. Elton even turned up and introduced Wham! onstage at their The Final concert at Wembley Stadium in 1986.

© Getty Images

well as Song of the Year for Bacharach and Bayer Sager. Returning to the studio that January, however, it was becoming quite evident that Elton was not well. His excesses were beginning to catch up with him and cloud his judgement.

With his 20th album, *Leather Jackets*, Elton used a lot of songs recorded for the *Ice On Fire* sessions. Notable guests on this occasion included Cher on *Don't Trust That Woman* and Cliff Richard on *Slow Rivers* (which performed miserably when released as a single). The lead single, *Heartache All Over The World,* has since been dismissed by Taupin and Elton as the worst song they ever recorded. The chart positions echoed the muddle, with the album struggling to No. 24 in the UK and a very poor No. 92 in the US. It was the worst-selling album of his career, and Elton has pretty much distanced himself from the whole affair; it remains un-remastered and tucked away at the back of the discography. "I was not a well budgie," Elton has remarked of his state of being at the time. "I was married and it was just one bag of coke after another.'

Elton ended 1986 with a series of concerts downunder, with Elton's Tour De Force of Australia with the 88-piece Melbourne Symphony Orchestra, and filmed the last show before undergoing throat surgery a couple of weeks later in January 1987. Though successful, the surgery prevented Elton from singing at all for several months and from touring for 18 months. The surgery also permanently reduced his vocal range from tenor to baritone.

FORTY NOT OUT

In the midst of the trouble that was brewing over in Fleet Street, Elton hit 40 and held a lavish party at Lockwood House in Hertfordshire. Over 350 guests attended, including George Harrison, Ringo Starr, Britt Ekland, Phil Collins, Lionel Richie, Richard

The Prince's Trust 10th Anniversary Rock Gala at Wembley on 23 June 1986 attracted a host of stars, although most were limited to just one tune: Elton performed *Your Song*

PITCH FEVER

ELTON AND WATFORD FC

Elton took over as chairman at Watford FC in 1976. A lifelong fan, he first stood on the terraces of the club at the age of six, and alongside music it became one of his lifelong passions.

After he became chairman, one of the first decisions Elton made was to appoint Graham Taylor as manager and to remove the dog-racing track that still circled the pitch. From that point, the only way was up: the club managed to go through consecutive promotions, and in 1982 it reached the First Division for the first time in its 100-year history. Watford also finished second in the First Division, with the added bonus of player Luther Blissett being the division's top scorer with 27 goals over that season.

In the 1983-84 season Watford qualified for the UEFA Cup, as and also reached Wembley for their first-ever FA Cup final (although Everton beat them 2-0).

The wheels started to come off for the team when Graham Taylor departed in 1987 for Aston Villa. He would return again in 1997, and a poor season saw them relegated to the Second Division in 1988. Watford players such as John Barnes, Ross Jenkins and Luther Blissett were some of the most respected footballers in the English game during the Eighties. After Taylor's departure the managerial slot was filled by Dave Bassett, who'd navigated Wimbledon through a similar trajectory up through the divisions. Unfortunately John Barnes was bought by Liverpool for a record £900,000, which damaged the club's chances further.

Elton began to wind down many of his business interests towards the end of the Eighties, and even dispensed of all acts – bar himself, naturally – on the Rocket label. Perhaps most shocking of all, considering the joy it had given him, he resigned as chairman and sold his 95 percent stake in the club. It was more down to economic sense than anything. Elton wasn't touring or releasing music, and so the regular income wasn't there for him to almost single-handedly keep the club afloat.

In 2008 Elton ended his formal involvement with the club by resigning as honorary life president in protest at the shambles the club had got into under inexperienced manager Aidy Boothroyd. After the club got back on track with a win against Norwich City in early 2009 under the new management of former Chelsea reserve Brendan Rodgers and Frank Lampard Snr as Football Consultant, Elton resumed his life president position. In 2014, the ground named a stand after him. Elton accepted the honour, saying it was "the greatest day of his life".

Elton and David: even by Elton's standards, his costume for his 40th birthday celebration in 1987 was lavish. It needed two "slaves" to carry his train

Branson… and the entire Watford football team. Guests of honour were Andy and Fergie, then the newlywed Duke and Duchess of York. The event featured five marquees, a Ferrari as a gift to Elton from John Reid, and an enormous firework display that created such a racket that local residents thought a nearby airbase was under attack.

On February 25 1987, *The Sun* published a story based on the insights of one 'Graham X', who let it be known that Elton was up to all sorts. The next day's paper featured further revelations. Elton denied both stories and swiftly issued two libel writs against the paper. The next day, the headline ran "You're A Liar, Elton", and over the next few months it continued publishing stories.

The publication of a borderline-insane story about Elton having his pet rottweilers' barks removed proved to be the final straw. When this suit became the first to go to trial, Elton proved that his dogs weren't actually rottweilers at all, and that they were perfectly capable of barking. The case fell apart when it was discovered that 'Graham X' turned out to be nothing to do with Elton, but had been coaxed along by *The Sun*, who'd also paid him handsomely for his "facts". However, all the allegations and aggravations were taking their toll on Elton. He was starting to drink heavily, was too depressed to get out of bed some days – and when he did break cover for appearances on TV shows, he looked a shadow of his former self.

© Getty Images

"I've been living in a warehouse, not a house…": Posing with a selection of stage costumes as they are prepared for auction in 1988

Elton would return to raising money for AIDS research when he made his one live appearance of 1987 at a World AIDS Day concert at Wembley Arena. The benefit was hosted by him and George Michael, and featured the likes of Kim Wilde, The Communards, Holly Johnson and Boy George.

THE RETURN OF REG

As 1988 began, a newly-invigorated Elton began to work on his "comeback album" *Reg Strikes Back* at AIR Studios, although it took longer than planned due to the accidental wiping of some recordings. It was released that June, making this period the longest gap he'd had between studio albums since the debacle of *Leather Jackets* two years earlier.

Reg Strikes Back was Elton's way of fighting back at the offensive publicity that had been thrown at him over the last few years. Recorded with his regular band and featuring guest turns from Pete Townshend plus Bruce Johnston and Carl Wilson from the Beach Boys, it also saw him reunited with producer Chris Thomas for the first time in five years. Lead single *I Don't Wanna Go On With You Like That* became his biggest solo hit in years in the US, when it reached No. 2. The album brought him back into the US Top 20 and managed to shift 500,000 copies over there, although its lifespan was slightly shorter in the UK, where it sold 60,000 copies.

With its cover festooned with the ephemera and outfits from his career, *Reg Strikes Back* was a break from the past in more ways than one for the newly-throated Elton. He auctioned off over 2000 bits and pieces from his wardrobe, as well as diaries and tour memorabilia in a massive four-day session at

Adopting a strong look at the Victoires de la Musique ceremony in Paris in 1989

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Above: Elton joins The Who for a performance of *Tommy* at the Universal Amphitheater in Los Angeles, California on August 24, 1989

© Getty Images

Elton back once again at Madison Square Garden in New York City on October 6, 1989

POP_UP Elton's ascent to royal performer began in 1981 when he played Prince Andrew's 21st at Windsor Castle. It was the beginning of a long friendship – especially with Princess Diana

Sotheby's – a sale that raised several million pounds. He then kicked off a new tour with two dates at the Royal Albert Hall, and continued to tour around the UK, US – including five nights at Madison Square Garden, taking his total appearances to 23 – and Japan, where he played dates with Eric Clapton.

As the end of the year approached, it was revealed that Elton and Renate had divorced. While they – according to those "sources" again – had their ups and downs, mainly due to Elton's touring and recording schedule, the pair insisted they were parting amicably, and hoped to remain friends. Elton then went into the studio to throw himself into his next album.

AS ELTON'S MOST TURBULENT PERIOD ENDED – AND HIS TROUBLES WOULD HAVE FINISHED OFF MANY LESSER ICONS – THE NINETIES OFFERED A WHOLE NEW ERA OF OPTIMISM AND POSITIVITY

When 1989 came around, Elton seemed keen to move on. With his Woodside house now free of all his pop lifestyle memorabilia, as well as his wife, he had the place completely renovated. He held a lunch there just before he moved out for the refurbishments, with the Queen Mother in attendance (possibly giving him tips on his upcoming "Queen Mum of Pop" title). Around this time, a collection of Elton's Thom Bell sessions was released by MCA, partly to showcase some hidden gems, and partly as a bid to stop bootlegs floating around. In March, Elton went on a massive world tour, playing 98 shows, starting in France, via the UK and 11 shows at Wembley Arena, then into the US with another five-night stint at Madison Square Garden, and ending up back in the UK with two shows at the Royal Albert Hall.

Sleeping With The Past gave Elton a UK Top 10 album that autumn, and a second lease of life in 1990 when *Sacrifice* and *Healing Hands* were reissued as a double A-side single. Reaching No. 1 during that run, it became Elton's first chart-topping album in the UK for 16 years.

As Elton's most turbulent period ended – and his troubles would have finished off many lesser icons – the Nineties offered a whole new era of optimism and positivity. Elton's first priority as the new decade dawned, however, was to finally get sober.

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LOVE AND LOSS

FOR SIR ELTON, AS HE WOULD SOON BECOME, THE NINETIES WOULD BE AN EVENTFUL ERA. FROM *THE LION KING* TO THE ROYAL ADAPTATION OF *CANDLE IN THE WIND*, FROM GRAMMY TRIUMPHS TO THE ALL-REVEALING *TANTRUMS & TIARAS*, NEW BEGINNINGS – AND SOME SAD ENDINGS – WERE TO DOMINATE THE DECADE…

JULIE BURNS

Elton's chosen styling to begin the new decade – a pinstripe suit, a tie and a grey fedora

© Getty Images

In many ways, it was a bright new era for Elton. Back on track after years of excess, he was on a high with both his professional and personal life. Not only did he create more Grammy-winning work, at last he also found domestic happiness.

He wanted to have a house "that was full of love and peace, a great place for friends to stay", he explained. So Elton emptied his main home in the English countryside of Berkshire of inessential clutter, and put his house in order. It was symbolic of the clear-out he'd had with himself. Having been publically open about the state of his life – blighted with addiction to drink and drugs – he began the Nineties with a self clean-up campaign, and renewed creative energy. Prolific as ever, in the following decade his status as songwriter extraordinaire, of being the world's number one piano showman, would, with consistent hard work and stellar new collaborations, stay intact. In the words of one of his famous earlier songs, Elton could have wryly described his own turnaround as, 'The Bitch is Back'…

THE CAPTAIN AND THE KIDS

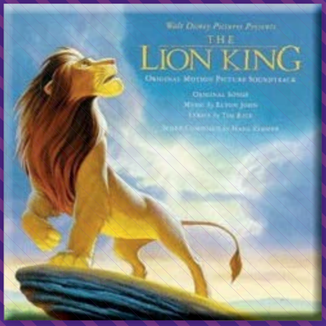
It was the era of the Blairite government and their swinging alliance with all things pop culture. Grunge kids, and especially the young

KEY RECORDINGS

1992-97

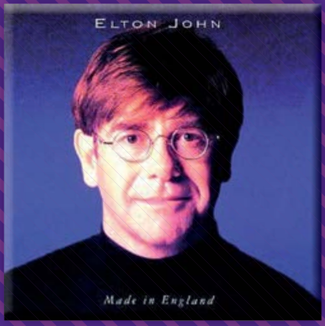
THE ONE
(1992)

Elton delivered this, his 23rd studio album and first album since major rehab for drug and alcohol dependency, with renewed flair and vigour. A hit in a dozen territories, it garnered amazing reviews and often multi-platinum certifications worldwide, and was Elton's biggest seller Stateside since 1975. Stand-out tracks featured equal rock supremos: Pink Floyd's guitarist David Gilmour on *Understanding Women*, and Eric Clapton in a duet with Elton, *Runaway Train* – both recorded in London. Perhaps at this point, Elton felt better amongst old friends: Kiki Dee provided notable backing vocals, while fashion maestro Gianni Versace designed the distinctive artwork. It would be the last to showcase Elton's trademark Roland RD-1000 digital piano – imminently 'upgraded' to a Yamaha Disklavier. Look out for Polygram's 1999 international version, with the addition of two interestingly quirky bonus tracks – *Suit Of Wolves* and (the not-very-PC) *Fat Boys And Ugly Girls*.



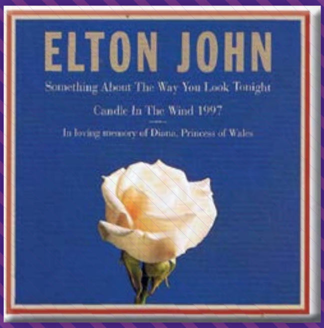
THE LION KING
(1994)

A huge commercial and critical animated Disney success that roars on and on. It proved to be 1994's best-selling soundtrack – the only animated film soundtrack to be RIAA Diamond certified (10 x platinum). Of their five original film songs, *Can You Feel The Love Tonight* won Elton and lyricist Tim Rice the Academy award for Best Original Song, along with two more nominations for *Circle Of Life* and *Hakuna Matata* – both in the same category. By 1997, *The Lion King* had expanded further into a massive runaway hit musical. Featuring songs from the film along with three new compositions by Elton and Tim, its Midas touch continued – it became one of the most successful productions in Broadway history. Ten years along, it's still going strong in New York, and adaptations are running across the globe. In 2016, the film was selected by the Library of Congress for preservation in the US National Film Registry, as being "culturally, historically or aesthetically significant".



MADE IN ENGLAND
(1995)

As *Rolling Stone* retrospectively remarked, it: "holds together as an accomplished, cohesive suite of songs whose underlying theme – the acceptance that comes with ageing – is often beautifully articulated." Never more so than on powerful, epic opener *Believe*, contender for a Bond song if ever there was one – and earning Elton Grammy/American Music Awards nominations for Best/Favourite Male Artist. The 11-track, guitar-based LP has many such triumphs: the R&B smoothie *Please*, the edgy *Made In England* and *Pain*, Elton's favourite *Blessed*, to the John Denver style country tilt of *Latitude* – arranged by luminary George Martin, also owner of London's AIR studios, scene of this recording. The (unusually for Elton) geo-political curiosity *Belfast* is perhaps the album's only misfire. Intriguingly, there are rumoured at least 10 outtakes (*Building A Bird*, *Leaves*, *Hell*, *Skin*, *Tick-Tock*, *Undone*, *Red*, plus alternate takes of *Belfast* and *Believe*) still to see official release.



CANDLE IN THE WIND
(1997)

This version held even greater poignancy than its first 1973 Marilyn Monroe- themed outing, dedicated as it was to the late Diana, Princess of Wales. Starting "Goodbye England's rose", it featured revised lyrics, and was again produced by George Martin.

An instant phenomenon, in the UK it sold a staggering 1.5 million in its first week of release. It then went on to sell an estimated 37 million copies worldwide, while in the US it earned exclusive RIAA diamond certification. It was No. 1 in 22 territories, and in Canada it spent three years in the top 20. According to the *Guinness Book of Records* 2009, it is the best-selling single since charts began (Bing Crosby's *White Christmas* being best-selling single of all time). All royalties were donated to Diana's charities.

Elton would perform *Goodbye England's Rose* publicly only once, at Diana's state funeral in Westminster Abbey, and has vowed never to do the Diana version again… unless asked to by her sons.

blades of Britpop, made endless headlines – typified by the in-your-face Manc band Oasis. Elton, in his more timeless style, managed to traverse the cult of youthful, cool Britannia with relative ease. Still master of his craft, he had an unerring ability to move and groove with the times, yet in his own crowd-pleasing way. He was particularly adept at creating different feels for different songs, a fact rewarded in the Nineties with some million-sellers, and a plethora of honours, kicking off with 1991's Brit award for Best British Male.

ELTON MANAGED TO TRAVERSE THE CULT OF COOL BRITANNIA WITH RELATIVE EASE. STILL MASTER OF HIS CRAFT, HE HAD AN UNERRING ABILITY TO MOVE AND GROOVE TO THE TIMES

TRIPLE GRAMMY

And the accolades kept on coming. Prior to his induction into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 1994, two years earlier Elton was inducted, along with Bernie Taupin, into the Songwriters Hall of Fame. The same year, he won the Grammy award for Best Instrumental Composition for *Basque* performed by flautist James Galway. While the next year, Grammy nominated for Best Pop Performance by a Duo or Group with Vocal, for *Don't Let the Sun Go Down On Me* with George Michael. By 1996, the powerful single *Believe* was nominated for Best Male Pop Vocal Performance, while in 1997, Elton won the same category for his second take on *Candle In The Wind*. Not surprisingly, by 1999, he was made recipient of the coveted Grammy Legend award. In the interim, he won his second award for outstanding contribution to music (1995), along with BMI Film & TV awards for Film Music and Most Performed Song (*Can You Feel the Love Tonight*). To top all that, appointed a CBE for services to music and charitable services in the mid-Nineties, Elton was elevated to Sir status with a knighthood in 1998.

John and Furnish in their famous silver Sun King get-ups at Elton's 50th birthday bash at the Hammersmith Palais on April 6, 1997

He was also always happy to share the limelight, and a collaborative album, 1993's *Duets*, was a star-studded mash-up affair, with Elton embracing a wide range of styles and vocal partners. Only four of the 16 tracks were by himself and Bernie. Instead, Elton favoured writers past to present: Cole Porter's *True Love* (with Kiki Dee), Chris Rea's *If You Were Me* (with Chris); Stevie Wonder's *Go On And On* (with Gladys Knight), Cecil and Linda Womack's *Teardrops* (with kd lang), and Ted Daffan's *Born To Lose* (with Leonard Cohen), amongst others. Of the Elton/Bernie quartet, the most overlooked had to be the rocking gospel pop of *The Power*, with living legend and Elton's honky-tonk piano hero Little Richard (a song consequently chosen as the closer on the Brit-flick caper *Greenfingers*, starring Clive Owen). *A Woman's Needs* with Tammy Wynette was an inspired blend, an exquisite teardrop of a sound.

The one everyone remembers is the live version of *Don't Let the Sun Go Down On Me* with George Michael – a previous UK/US No. 1, transplanting the original planned release *This Kind Of Love*. In Britain, there was a hat-trick of further singles: *True Love* (No. 2); a rather camp *Don't Go Breaking My Heart* with drag queen RuPaul replacing Kiki Dee, reaching No. 7; and a sweet, soulful *Ain't Nothing Like The Real Thing* with Marcella Detroit (No. 24). Such was the clamour around the album, it debuted in Britain at an impressive No. 7 in the charts.

PRIDE OF PLACE

In his 40s to 50s, Elton's work was in demand, and riding an exciting new phase, with offers such as Disney's ambitious *The Lion King*. Ironically, Elton was third choice to work alongside lyricist Tim Rice on the prestige project. The latter had already suggested his current *Aladdin* composing partner Alan Menken, followed by Abba's Benny Andersson, but both were unavailable. Though something of a creative departure, Elton was enthused to collaborate on the first Disney animated feature to be an original story – and a colossal hit. He considered he could write "ultra-pop songs that kids would like, then adults can go and see those movies and get just as much pleasure out of them". He was inspired by classic family film *The Jungle Book*: "the music was so funny and appealed to kids and adults". Always one to champion the underdog – much like the film-into-musical character of Billy Elliott that would come along later – likely Elton identified with *The Lion King*'s universal, emotive subject matter. As film critic

The just-knighted Elton with his mother, stepfather and partner David Furnish in London, 24 February 1998

A jubilant Elton poses, Best Song award in hand, with *Lion King* songwriting partner Tim Rice at the 67th Academy Awards

© Getty Images

Roger Ebert described it: "The saga of Simba, which in its deeply buried origins owes something to Greek tragedy and certainly to Hamlet."

As well as their abandoned song, *The Morning Report* – later added to the IMAX and DVD releases, and featured in the musical version – John and Rice wrote five original songs for the film: *I Just Can't Wait To Be King*, *Be Prepared*, the Grammy-nominated duo *Hakuna Matata*, *Circle of Life*, and *Can You Feel The Love Tonight*. The latter won Best Song at 1995's Academy Awards, and in his acceptance speech Elton devoted the honour to his recently deceased nan – "she was the one who sat me down at the piano aged three, and made me play". The rest of Elton's recording output spanned three new studio albums: *The One* (1992); *Made In England* (1995); and 1997's *The Big Picture*.

As a wide fan of a range of music from old school rockers to keeping up with chart-toppers, Elton's Nineties playlist of choice included Anastacia, Mary J Blige, Tom Petty, and Massive Attack.

POP_UP Ever the dog-lover, Elton has owned well over 20 of them, including several border terriers, a cocker spaniel, and a labrador. In the mid-Nineties he was gifted a new dog. He named it… Graham

SPARRING PARTNER

Mid-decade, Elton embarked on a renowned world tour, taking in Brazil, Argentina, Chile, Peru, Switzerland, Poland, France, Italy, the UK and Japan. This would form the Elton-authorised subject of the incredibly candid documentary *Tantrums & Tiaras*. It helped matters that the film was made by his partner David Furnish who, at this point, had been with Elton for two years. After considerable personal ups and downs and relationship upheavals over the years, in David's company Elton appeared to grow more noticeably content – even if he could still throw a spectacular strop.

AFTER UPS AND DOWNS, AND RELATIONSHIP UPHEAVAL, IN DAVID'S COMPANY ELTON APPEARED TO GROW MORE NOTICEABLY CONTENT – EVEN IF HE DID STILL THROW A SPECTACULAR STROP

In *Tantrums & Tiaras*, John was declared the highest of the top 20 money earners in British rock'n'roll. He didn't seem surprised: "I write songs that continually

Elton appears on a 1998 episode of *South Park* – the star has featured on several episodes, and contributed the song *Wake Up Wendy* to the *Chef Aid: The South Park Album*

sell. I have a back catalogue that continues to sell, and if you own the songs as I do now, it's a lucrative life." The question of what he'd do should the hits dry up was instantly dismissed: "That's an unhealthy way to think. It doesn't work like that. I've been around 25 years, it's not going to happen."

Six months after the documentary aired, the press were still talking about his candid showcase. "I wanted to do a more groundbreaking, warts-and-all film, which is not what you usually get until someone's dead," Elton said. "It's an accurate depiction of my life when I'm touring." It came at the right time: ("It would have been impossible five years ago, I wouldn't have been compos mentis"). It also seemed to prove a turning point in terms of his self-acceptance and esteem issues. As for his gifted creativity, one of the most remarkable reveals in the whole film was the fact that Elton never spends more than an hour composing a song. "If it doesn't come to me then, I abandon it," he stated. This fact was borne out by footage of Elton composing the music for a collaboration with singer Lulu, coming up with *Really Worth Fighting For* in the studio between 4-5pm precisely – before calling a tea break.

A great testament to his continued prowess, the documentary offers a sparkling selection of songs, from past gems to Elton's Nineties numbers, from classics such as *Crocodile Rock*, *Sacrifice*, *Daniel*, *Pinball Wizard*, *I'm Still Standing*, *I Guess That's Why They Call It The Blues*, *Don't Let The Sun Go Down On Me*, *Your Song*, to *Blessed*, his favourite track of his then most recent album, *Made In England*.

The title track, written as usual by Bernie, with its sassy reference to the singer's sexuality, was for Elton, unusually autobiographical: "If you're made in England/ You're built to last/ You can still say homo/ And everybody laughs". It seemed to be a measure

RuPaul replaced Kiki Dee at the mic for a remake of *Don't Go Breaking My Heart* and this high-camp rendering made UK No. 7

Sir Elton sings an emotional *Goodbye England's Rose* at the funeral of Diana, Princess of Wales on September 6, 1997

of how increasingly comfortable Elton was in his own, now middle-aged but markedly more mellow, skin.

FOND FAREWELL

In addition, Elton would send himself up in a cameo in the light-hearted film *Spice World UK*, featuring the Spice Girls at the height of their fame. Unfortunately, for Elton the fun would fast turn to tears, in what he later referred to as the "weirdest summer of my life". Not long after losing his friend Gianni Versace in a fatal shooting outside the Italian designer's home – and attending the funeral with mutual friend Diana, Princess of Wales – by August 31st, to shock waves across the nation, the Princess was pronounced dead in a Paris car crash. Elton personally learned of her death on receiving a fax of condolences from a friend.

Understandably, he struggled with his emotions. At the same time, he was asked by the royal family to sing at Diana's funeral. He wanted to pay tribute, but time was short to compose something new. Instead, he and Bernie decided their iconic song *Candle In The Wind* could be lyrically adapted to fit Diana's situation. Diana had been a fan of the original incarnation. "Goodbye England's rose" famously and poignantly began the song salute to the Princess.

In a gesture of respect, despite frequent requests, Elton has never since performed the Diana version of the song. In fact, it has only been released once, on the official soundtrack, *Diana, Princess of Wales: The BBC Recording of the Funeral Service*. It has never otherwise been released on any of Elton's other albums or compilations; not even on the tribute album, as endorsed by Diana's family.

IN A GESTURE OF RESPECT, DESPITE FREQUENT REQUESTS, ELTON HAS NEVER PERFORMED *GOODBYE ENGLAND'S ROSE* SINCE DIANA'S FUNERAL, NOR HAS IT BEEN RELEASED ON ANY OF HIS ALBUMS

Elton had first met Diana back in 1981, when performing for Prince Andrew's 21st birthday party – and was charmed to receive a thank-you note from the then 19-year-old Shy Di'. Elton had already had a long liaison with the royal family dating from the Seventies and had performed at many private royal events, but his increasing friendship with Diana was something else. As well as moving in some of the same cultural and social circles, Elton and Diana bonded by having unique things in common. Most notably, they shared compassion for the fight against AIDS oppression at a

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time when the disease still held stigma. In addition, on a highly personal level, each had an eating disorder they'd put down to the pressures of fame. Elton was later asked on CNN by chatshow host Larry King if he'd been aware of Diana's disorder at the time of their friendship. "Yes I did," he said. "We were both bulimic." Both had gone public in their trials of life.

Just six weeks after attending Gianni's funeral, by the 6th September '97, Elton had to steel himself to perform the revised *Candle In The Wind* at Diana's formal funeral service at Westminster Abbey. He later recalled it as "the most surreal experience, one I never wish to repeat". Watched on TV footage by some 1.5 billion people worldwide, he pulled off the impossibly emotional and daunting task with great dignity. In an interview with VH-1, he described the moment: "What was going through my mind was… 'Don't sing a wrong note. Don't sing the wrong note. Be stoic. Don't break down and just do it the best you can possibly do it without showing any emotion whatsoever.' My heart was beating quite a lot, I have to say."

It was agreed that all global sales of the song would be donated to Diana's charities, via the Diana, Princess of Wales Memorial Fund. Most often, the single was backed with *Something About The Way You Look Tonight* – in impact, making it an unprecedented double A-side. It was presumably cold comfort for Elton to be told that in the US, this rendition of *Candle In The Wind* had, in effect, lifted his "Kiki jinx" – as in, after major solo success

TANTRUMS AND TIARAS

ONSCREEN ANTICS

In January 1995, Elton John gave David Furnish permission to follow him on his major world tour: "I didn't want any dissection of my music, I didn't want a retrospective, I thought it would be nice for the public to know a bit more about me." Filmed at home and on location, from the South of France to Santiago, and culminating in the last leg of his concert tour in Rio – as well as backstage at the Academy Awards – it presented an unexpected and never before seen insight into the showman, complete with famous hissy fits. Elton declared he was suitably pleased with the accurate depiction and "funny" results, and recited one critic's remark with glee, that he'd appeared like the equivalent of (*Coronation Street*'s) "Bet Lynch storming round with her leopard-skin coat on".

Despite looking uncomfortable filming the video for his hit single *Believe*, for someone with a professed poor self-image, overall Elton said he'd found making the documentary "therapeutic". "It's to do with the way I look, and the way I wished I looked," he said at the start. "I'm not Madonna and I'm not George Michael. I'm not someone with such a strong image." There were many more revealing Elton quotes laced throughout…

- On self-esteem: "You've got to love yourself! You've got to love yourself! So you get told. I know that… but 43 years' behaviour doesn't change overnight."
- On love: "I give love so much but find it hard to receive."
- On losing friends to AIDS: "I've lost quite a lot of people this year. I haven't been able to cry. I feel numb… I find doing Foundation concerts more enjoyable. I want to make as much money as possible for a good cause."
- On standing his ground: "I'm always going to do what I want to do. If people don't like that they can leave. As for being told to slow down, why should I slow down?"
- On his extensive, and expensive, wardrobe: "I like to feel good. Having so many clothes I agree is self-indulgent but for some reason, I find it comforting."
- On taking so much on tour: "I have to take everything with me on tour. It's crazy but keeps me sane, like a home from home."
- On monitoring record sales: "If I put a record out and didn't care, that would be a very strange state of affairs. I'm passionate about my work."
- On ageing (then aged 48): "I'm older. I'm much happier."
- On his highlights: "I like the bit with my gran, as that's the last time I saw her, and with my mother. And the humour."
- On life: "A rollercoaster ride of terrible times and great times."

Find more of Elton's quotes on p128…

Top left, Ryan White and Elton; below, Elton consoles Ryan's mother Jeanne White; above right, Elton performs *Skyline Pigeon* at Ryan's funeral on April 11, 1990 in Indianapolis

POP_UP *Something About The Way You Look Tonight* features organ from Paul Carrack (Ace, Squeeze) and guitar from John Jorgenson (Desert Rose Band)

in the Seventies Stateside, Elton's next No. 1 was in 1976 with singer Kiki Dee (*Don't Go Breaking My Heart*), followed by other chart-topping collaborations: in 1986 (*That's What Friends Are For*), and 1992's big duet with George Michael. Otherwise, in all the intervening years, he did not have a solo hit that peaked – until now. The record-breaking song also won him Best Male Pop Vocal Performance at the 40th Grammy Awards in 1998, and was nominated for Best British single at the 1998 Brit Awards.

> THE SONG THAT COMPLETELY OVERSHADOWED THE REST ON *THE BIG PICTURE* WAS THE SULTRY *SOMETHING ABOUT THE WAY YOU LOOK TONIGHT*, AND ITS VIDEO IS REGARDED AS ONE OF HIS BEST

SLOW STEPS

A month later came the release of the album *The Big Picture*. Weighty in adult contemporary appeal, its accent was firmly on the big ballad. Along with emotionally-charged, melodically-rich material such as the title track, *Recover Your Soul* and *If The River Can Bend*, an overlooked track was the majestic *Live Like Horses*. This alone was testament to Elton's ability to translate into diverse contexts; it had been previously beautifully set as an anthemic/operatic epic duet between Elton and the great tenor Luciano Pavarotti, on the TV benefit show, *Pavarotti & Friends For War Child*.

However, the song that completely overshadowed the rest on this album was the sultry *Something About The Way You Look Tonight*. To take the pressure off making the usual video accompaniment – a process described by Elton as being "loathsome" to him – the song instead featured actors from the TV programme *This Life*, along with supermodels Kate Moss and Sophie Dahl. Widely regarded as one of Elton's best pop videos, it's significant that after this album, he would only agree to make cameo appearances in his videos.

Elton thanks the audience at the Pavarotti And Friends Concert in 1996, where he performed *Live Like Horses* with Luciano himself

As a further note on Elton's many hidden gems, another was the Kurt Weill-style *For Wanting You*, a haunting ballad first studio recorded by Elton, and ultimately released by Marianne Faithfull on her 1998 album *Vagabond Ways*. With its filmic music and wrenching lyrics – "Your every kiss tasting like a tomb and I don't want to bleed/ Or bruise up black and blue/ Do I deserve these things/ All for wanting you?" – it serves as one of Elton and Bernie's most darkly dramatic moments, and is well worth a listen (with hankies at the ready).

Back to the *Tantrums & Tiaras* documentary, one member of Elton's entourage had described Elton as: "A total obsessive compulsive. If it hadn't have been alcohol it would have been drugs, if it hadn't have been drugs it would have been food, if it hadn't been food, relationships." Who knows, grief in losing so many friends famous and otherwise, could well have been the latest catalyst… but Elton's conspicuous consumption rocketed ever more skywards. In a 20-month period from 1996-'97, he poured more than £9.6 million into his property portfolio – at least that was asset-worthy – and a reported £293,000 on flowers. By the end of the decade, Elton evaluated

Odd couple: Elton duets with Guns N'Roses frontman Axl Rose at the Freddie Mercury Tribute Concert on 20 April 1992

© Getty Images

that he'd spent a staggering £30 million in just under two years. No doubt a tongue-in-cheek nod and wink to his own lavish standards was the outrageous, all-white £50,000 fancy dress ensemble donned for his 50th birthday milestone – as Sun King Louis XIV – complete with opulent ostrich-feather train, and giant £3,500 wig. By now the owner of six grand residences – Berkshire, London's Holland Park, Nice, Venice, LA, and Atlanta – even Elton had to admit his free-spending was excessive. As some concession, he would start the next decade by auctioning 20 of his covetable cars at Christies (amongst the sumptuous Ferraris, Bentleys and Rolls-Royces, the priciest highlight was a 1993 Jaguar XJ220, sold for a cool £234,750).

"I LOVE THIS COUNTRY," ELTON PROCLAIMED WITH CANDOUR. "I CAME OUT IN THIS COUNTRY… I CAME OUT AS HIV NEGATIVE. I'M A LUCKY, LUCKY PERSON. NOW IT'S MY JOB TO REPAY THAT DEBT"

REG FUND

Yet for all the fortune spent on a fabulous lifestyle, Elton sought to increase his efforts as a major fund-raiser. Set up in 1992 in the US and 1993 in the UK, his charitable Elton John AIDS Foundation was already well-established. Amongst its aims, Elton explained, "to fund programmes for HIV/AIDS prevention, for the elimination of discrimination against those affected, and for the provision of services to people". Elton was profoundly affected by an onslaught of deaths from the disease among those he knew. These included first high-profile AIDS patient Ryan White – infected from a blood transfusion – to whom Elton dedicated a song at Farm Aid 4 in 1990: the next night, Ryan tragically died aged just 18. The following year came the passing of Elton's equal in flamboyant showmanship, Freddie Mercury. (Around this time, guesting at a packed US benefit show, with characteristic candour, Elton proclaimed, "I love this country. I came out in this country… and I came out with HIV negative. I'm a lucky, lucky person. It's my job to repay that debt".) This he did in the way he knew best – as the consummate entertainer. In 1993, he began hosting his infamous annual Academy Award party, to date, conservative figures suggest it has raised over US $200 million (the event raised a record $6.3 million in 2016).

By 1998, in order to escalate fundraising still further, he began opening up the grounds of his palatial pad in Windsor, Berkshire, charging his Who's Who of pals – from Joan Collins to Liz Hurley, Ronan Keating and Posh and Becks – a charity fee to attend his annual, star-studded *White Tie & Tiara Ball*. Elton was enjoying putting his money where his mouth was to help others. From such philanthropy to the never-ending merry-go-round of touring and delivering hit music, he'd proved he was still very much a force to be reckoned with.

POP_UP Elton used some interesting hotel pseudonyms during the Nineties that included 'Prince Fooboo', 'Sir Horace Pussy' and 'Sir Humphrey Handbag'

With songwriting partner Bernie Taupin at the Elton John AIDS Foundation Party at Pagani's in LA, after the 71st Academy Awards in 1999

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CLASSIC

ALBUM

CAPTAIN FANTASTIC AND THE BROWN DIRT COWBOY

ELTON JOHN

WORD BY WORD, LINE BY LINE, SONG BY SONG, ELTON'S INSTANTLY TOP-SELLING ALBUM OF 1975 EXPLAINED EXACTLY WHERE HE AND BERNIE HAD COME FROM. WHO WAS THE CAPTAIN? WHO WAS THE COWBOY? THE ANSWER WOULD BECOME CLEAR…

IAN WADE

It's 1975, and being Elton John looks like just about the most fun thing ever. Recording a TV special with Cher, jamming with the Doobie Brothers, massive stadium gigs planned for a US tour – and there still doesn't seem to be a shortage of people buying his records. Elton John is, quite literally, having his moment.

You would have half-expected the singer to have wanted to have put his feet up for a bit in the mid-Seventies. He'd pretty much conquered America, and still managed to knock out eight albums in the space of just over four years, and just seen his first *Greatest Hits* compilation spend over two months at the top of the UK album charts.

Already, 1975 was one of the most pivotal years in Elton's career. He spent the entire 12 months in both the US and UK album and singles charts, and was at the peak of his success: it was a year that culminated with two double-whammy extremes – an attempted overdose, and a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame. It's enough to make anyone think about having a little break… and yet there was something very important Elton still had to get out of his system – and that something was the tantalisingly-titled *Captain Fantastic And The Brown Dirt Cowboy*.

Elton had more than put the hours in, and had the sales and success to show for it, and so when he was ready to begin work on his 12th album, he did so at his own pace and followed his muse and heart. On paper, this project may have looked like commercial suicide. Instead, it would come to be considered one of his creative peaks.

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The revealing *Captain Fantastic* would detail the tribulations of a one-time pub pianist trying to make it big in the '60s

THE LONELY CLIMB

Elton was quite happy to issue a warning. Briefing *Rolling Stone* about *Captain Fantastic* ahead of release, he said, "It's a story of all the things that happened to Bernie and me, how we met, all we went through up to the point of the *Empty Sky* album, and all the disappointments, our experiences with music publishers, asking for 10 quid a week to live on. It's the entire album, and I think it's very uncommercial. I don't know if there'll be any singles on it, even now that we've recorded it."

Captain Fantastic was the first album released after his manager, the legendary John Reid, had renegotiated a five-year deal for six albums with MCA, which would net Elton $8 million – and more, after he'd arranged a 20 per cent royalty rate. The fact that it would go on to sell over three million copies in the States meant Elton would be quids/dollars in. "It's a great deal," he told *Rolling Stone* in 1974. "It gives me more flexibility, and there won't be so much product, but it will give the public and me a chance to get used to the fact that I won't be around so much. I want to do other things."

> "It's a story of all the things that happened to Bernie and me, how we met, all we went through up to the *Empty Sky* album, the disappointments, our experiences with music publishers, asking for £10 a week to live on" **ELTON JOHN**

At this point it may have looked as if Elton had nothing left to prove, having managed to conquer America's charts and stadiums while also winning over his critics. Yet *Captain Fantastic* was an opportunity to showcase everything that he'd become

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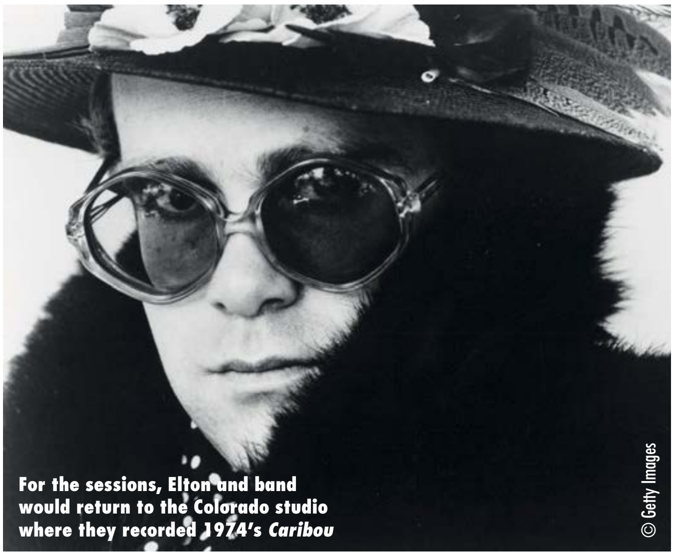
known for, but would also mark a sort-of "mission accomplished" ending to his American adventure.

So it was that John and Taupin decided to embark upon a concept album about their early musical career in the late Sixties. At this point the vast majority of Elton's fans were well aware of the showman and his high camp extravagance, but knew far less about the struggles of he and Taupin in both their lives and their careers, before the success of *Your Song*. Bernie wrote the lyrics between

"Elton and I had an hour a day in this bizarre little room which they had for entertainers who wanted to rehearse. We were sandwiched between a ventriloquist and an opera singer or something"
DAVEY JOHNSTONE



For the sessions, Elton and band would return to the Colorado studio where they recorded 1974's *Caribou*

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Elton at the mixing desk of a New York recording studio on May 13, 1975

May and July 1974, while Elton wrote the music in three locations: England; the Caribou Ranch recording studio in Colorado; and aboard the SS France ocean liner during a six-day voyage from the UK to New York.

Elton would detail some of these sessions in an exclusive diary for British *Vogue* magazine. "July 22, 1974… at 12:00 I go to the music room to write some new songs," he wrote. "I have only booked it for two hours and to my embarrassment have to eject the ship's classical pianist. She, however, makes her way to another room directly above and commences battle. I decide to write an up-tempo number as most of the songs so far are slowsy. By 1pm *Meal Ticket* is complete – very pleased with it. Play it to the band and they nod their approval."

Guitarist Davey Johnstone recalled this time spent on the SS France: "Elton and I had an hour every day in this bizarre little room, which they had for entertainers who wanted to rehearse. We were sandwiched between a ventriloquist and an opera singer or something. Elton wrote *Captain Fantastic*, and started *Bitter Fingers* and a few other songs. So we really had the sense of the album before we even got to New York harbour."

COWBOY RANCH

By the time everybody descended to Caribou Ranch, Elton and his band had sketched out the album ready to be recorded within a month-sized gap between tours. The songs would be recorded in the sequence in which they would appear on the album. Producer Gus Dudgeon remarked that it was "probably the only time that's ever been done". "Good fun doing it that way," he added; "It helped us to judge the next track by the track we'd just worked on, and it gave it a sort of natural momentum."

According to Dudgeon, *We All Fall In Love Sometimes* and *Curtains* were actually recorded as one whole piece, despite being listed as two separate tracks on the finished album. "The two songs were recorded as one complete piece all the way through," he explained in a later interview, "but it was done in two takes. I remember that Neil Sedaka walked into the control room just as we began the second take. The band actually had just started the song as he walked in. And I thought, 'Now, this is going to be interesting, to see what his reaction is.' Because it's nearly 11 minutes long. So it got to about nine minutes, and he came over to me and whispered, 'My God, are they doing this all in one go or are they dubbing on?' And I said, 'No, it's all in one go.' He went, 'Jesus, they've been going on for hours!'"

Recalling *We All Fall In Love Sometimes* with

ELTON'S EPILOGUE

THE CAPTAIN AND THE KID

Sequels to famous albums usually happen when a certain special team reunites (ABC's *Lexicon Of Love 2*, Neil Young's *Harvest Moon*) or when the act themselves require a bit of a boost (there's been three parts to Meat Loaf's *Bat Out Of Hell*, and FOUR of Mike Oldfield's *Tubular Bells*), but Elton was in no need to resurrect anything, having enjoyed a return-to-form run of successes in the early 2000s. *The Captain And The Kid* caught up with Elton and Bernie's story over 30 years later, and it also reunited the original team, although it would be the last Elton solo album that long-time sessioners Bob Birch and Guy Babylon would appear on. Recorded in 20 days, it too was written and recorded in sequence, catching up with the key characters, echoing Elton and Bernie's adventures since then. While not quite reaching the heights *Captain Fantastic* had – Elton threatened to end his record contract over Interscope's lack of support – it fitted into part of a career renaissance of acclaimed albums where Elton John got back to being Elton John, free of the pressures of having to knock out hit singles and pleasing everyone else.

By the time of *Captain Fantastic* Elton and Bernie had been together for eight long years and had gone from obscurity and poverty in London to worldwide fame

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Cameron Crowe for *Rolling Stone* in 2013, Elton said, "I cry when I sing this song, because I was in love with Bernie, not in a sexual way, but because he was the person I was looking for my entire life, my little soulmate. We'd come so far, and we were still very naive. I was gay by that time and he was married, but he was a person that, more than anything, I loved, and the relationship we had was so odd, because it was not tied at the hip. Thank God it wasn't tied at the hip, because we wouldn't have lasted. That relationship is the most important relationship of my entire life."

CLOSE TO THE EDGE

The single, and perhaps best-known track, *Someone Saved My Life Tonight*, refers to a time in 1969 when a pre-fame Elton was engaged to be married to his girlfriend Linda Woodrow. It was his first love, but Elton was starting to fret about the union and had even contemplated suicide. Opening up to his friends – in particular the blues singer Long John Baldry ("Sugar Bear", as referenced in the lyric) – convinced him to cancel the nuptials and instead concentrate on his career. Dudgeon pushed Elton to deliver better vocal takes, but was blissfully aware of the subject matter until guitarist Davey Johnstone told the producer, "You know he's singing about killing himself?" Horrified, Gus relented. Asked how long it took for him to get over the experience, Elton remarked to *Rolling Stone* in 1976 that "the famous woman [Woodrow] frightened me off sex for so long that I don't remember, really. I think it was a good year or two."

When it was released as a single, Elton refused to allow the song to be edited down for radio consumption. While not such a big hit in the UK, reaching only No. 22, it would make No. 4 on the Billboard chart, quite a feat considering how much of that was down to radio play.

The sniffy *Rolling Stone* review of the album at the time conceded that "As long as Elton John can bring forth one performance per album on the order of *Someone Saved My Life Tonight*, the chance remains that he will become something more than the great entertainer he already is and go on to make a lasting contribution to rock."

To release an album with just one single may have seemed like a risky move, especially as the single's duration was a radio-unfriendly 6.46 – but

On October 25 and 26 1975, Elton played two sold-out shows at LA's Dodger Stadium, performing upwards of 30 songs over three hours

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THE PLAYERS

RELEASED May 19th 1975

LABEL MCA (US)/ DJM (UK)

PRODUCED BY
Gus Dudgeon

RECORDED AT
Caribou Ranch, Nederland, Colorado

PERSONNEL
Elton John – vocals, acoustic and electric pianos, clavinet, mellotron, ARP String Ensemble synthesiser, harpsichord

ADDITIONAL MUSICIANS
Davey Johnstone – acoustic and electric guitars, some with rotating Leslie speaker; mandolin, piano on *Writing*, backing vocals
Dee Murray – bass guitar, backing vocals
Nigel Olsson – drums, backing vocals
Ray Cooper – shaker, congas, gong, jawbone, tambourine, bells, bell tree, cymbals, triangle, bongos

it became a record-breaker. Becoming the first album in Billboard's history to enter their album chart at No. 1, it remained there for seven weeks. He'd already released a couple of standalone singles with his version of *Lucy In The Sky With Diamonds* and also with *Philadelphia Freedom* three months before the album's release (these would be added on later reissues).

Elton's producer Gus Dudgeon believed *Captain Fantastic* to be Elton and his band's finest moment. "There's not one song on it that's less than incredible," he told author Elizabeth Rosenthal. Speaking to EltonJohn.com, Davey Johnstone added, "It was really cool. I knew there was something special. This was going to be an autobiographical album, the story of what happened, and we weren't concerned at all about commerciality. It was a really fun album to make."

> "In a way, years later, I became Captain Fantastic and he ended up the Brown Dirt Cowboy: here's me living my fabulous lifestyle, and Bernie is interested in horses and bull riding and shit. Who was to know?" **ELTON JOHN**

In a 2006 interview with Cameron Crowe ahead of the release of "sequel" *The Captain And The Kid*, Elton concurred, 'I've always thought that *Captain Fantastic* was probably my finest album because it wasn't commercial in any way. We did have songs such as *Someone Saved My Life Tonight*, which is one of the best songs that Bernie and I have ever written together, but whether a song like that could be a single these days, since it's six minutes long, is questionable.

"*Captain Fantastic* was written from start to finish in running order, as a kind of story about coming to terms with failure – or trying desperately not to be one. We lived that story.

"In a way, years later, I ended up being Captain Fantastic and he ended up the Brown Dirt Cowboy: here, I'm living my fabulous lifestyle, collecting paintings, and Bernie is interested in horses and bull riding and shit. We became those characters. Who was to know?"

Captain Fantastic would be the last album Elton would make with his 'classic' band line-up until 1983's *Too Low For Zero*. Whether this was a conscious decision or not, it did allow Elton and Bernie to branch out with other producers and musicians. In some ways, *Captain Fantastic* marked an end to Elton's Imperial Phase, with no album managing to reach the sales heights of his truly great mid-Seventies output. ■

Elton in full flight at Madison Square Garden in New York on October 21, 2000, a date in the One Night Only – Greatest Hits series

ONE NIGHT STAND

AS THE TRADITIONAL APPARATUS OF THE RECORD INDUSTRY COLLAPSED AROUND HIM, ELTON JOHN CONSOLIDATED HIS POSITION AS THE TOAST OF MUSICAL THEATRE WHILE INCREASING THE PACE OF HIS TOURING PROGRAMME. AS WELL AS THAT, THREE NEW STUDIO PROJECTS WOULD SIGNAL THE START OF A CRITICAL – IF NOT COMMERCIAL – RENAISSANCE

MARK ELLIOTT

Although *The Lion King* and *Aida* appeared to set the template for Elton John's first major project of the new millennium, those extraordinary Nineties successes weren't to exhaustively define the decade that followed. The Noughties actually represented a period of consolidation for the singer-songwriter with a nicely balanced mix of studio sets, with some revisiting familiar templates and others that moved things on. Of course, the 2005 phenomenal hit that was *Billy Elliot The Musical* would further strengthen Elton's standing in musical theatre, but not everything he touched in this field would turn to gold. Alongside the decade's relentless concert schedule – he would follow many other acts' increasing focus on this income stream across these years – this was also the moment where Elton's profile as a human rights torchbearer became more widely recognised, and he also became one of the first British men to enter into a civil partnership, almost 30 years after he started talking to the world about his sexuality.

The 2000 animated feature *The Road To Eldorado* had been developed by the DreamWorks studio, and hopes were high the animated caper would deal Disney – home of *The Lion King* – a bloody nose. It was inevitable the producers would court John for the

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A NEW CENTURY

KEY ALBUMS **2000-2009**

SONGS FROM THE WEST COAST (2001)

This folk-rock concoction was John's most critically appreciated release since the Seventies. Drafting in Madonna's collaborator Patrick Leonard to bathe 12 largely introspective songs in a slick pop sheen proved a winning formula. John said Ryan Adams' *Heartbreaker* had inspired the album and that influence is clear, but it owes as much to his and Taupin's early work as anything more contemporary. It was recorded on analogue tape, allegedly to add some warmth to its sound; it's actually a rather chilly record in tonal terms, but the production gloss smooths out its sharper corners. There is a muscular confidence to the songwriting with a predictable blend of classic John ballads and lighter, country-influenced shufflers. *American Triangle*, a duet with Rufus Wainwright, is an obvious highlight, but second single *This Train Don't Stop Here Anymore* actually sums up the album nicely: a nod to the past but a direction of travel that's firmly focused forward.

THE ROAD TO ELDORADO (2000)

The success of any movie soundtrack is largely dependent on the project's box office, and so it's a shame this little-remembered effort is relegated to a file marked 'Also Rans'. There's much to enjoy beyond the obvious melodic pop of lead single *Someday Out Of The Blue*. *My Heart Dances*, for example, is a mournful ballad that could have come from the David Foster songbook. With lyrics once again penned by Tim Rice, it contains all the classic ingredients of a great John ballad: neatly infectious melody, a satisfying build and hooks you'll keep coming back to. The Latin influence across the set's 11 songs (complemented by three scores on CD) keeps things perky, and an all-star guest-list – Backstreet Boys, Don Henley and Randy Newman (in a duet on *It's Tough To Be A God*) – maintains the interest. A flaccid script about the search for gold lent little inspiration, but this is a bit of treasure worth digging out.

PEACHTREE ROAD (2004)

The dusty canvas of *Peachtree Road*, drenched even more deeply in Americana than before, was the first album where John was to take sole control of the production. This was a bold move for his 28th record, and as a result this under-rated 12-song collection hits corresponding highs and lows. *All That I'm Allowed* is a gorgeous bid for chart glory – John at his most commercial, with an upbeat pop riff that would have stormed the listings in decades past – but others such as the strained *They Call Her The Cat* never quite take flight. Hammond organs, mandolins and pedal steel offer a rich orchestration, giving this a texture quite unlike much of the back catalogue, while *Porch Swing In Tupelo* sounds like it could have been recorded 30 years earlier. Repackaged later with extra songs to improve its flaccid commercial fortunes, the original *Peachtree Road* is John's more concise, authentic love-note to contemporary country.

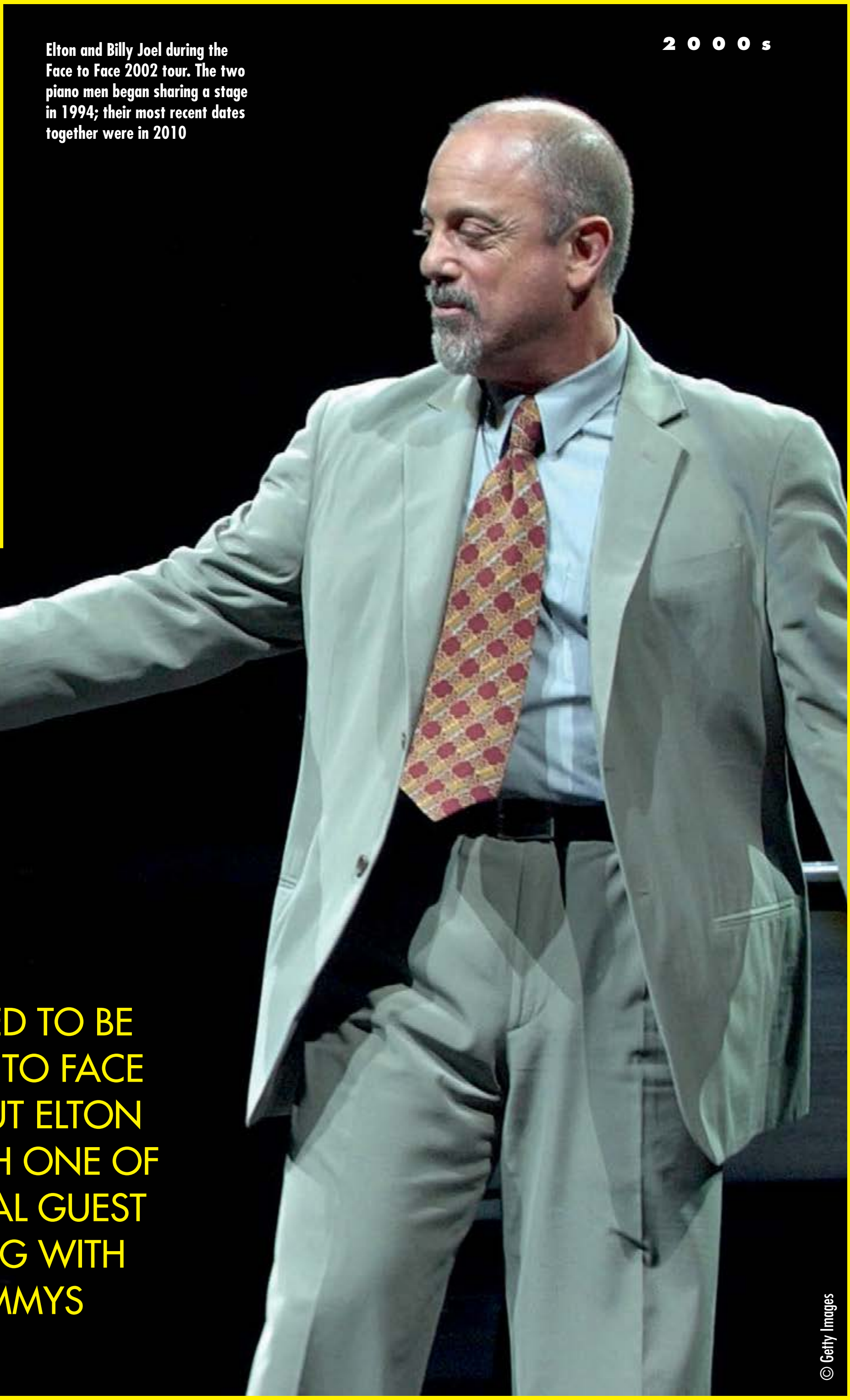
THE CAPTAIN AND THE KID (2006)

Whatever happened to the characters brought to life on 1975's *Captain Fantastic And The Brown Dirt Cowboy*? As John and Taupin try to answer that question three decades on, one is never quite clear how much of their response is a fictional construct. But it certainly feels authentic, lending the project a rich charm. *Tinderbox* is a country-infused slice of melancholia; the song failed to make much impact, yet it's an obvious highlight and was added to the *Rocket Man* hits collection. Elsewhere, some of the mood is gloomy and John's vocals are starting to show some wear, but the looping melodies make this something of a gift for fans searching for a return to the warmer uplands of John and Taupin's Seventies peak. It's a partnership as tight as the day the pair first boarded that plane to America's West Coast.

© Photoshot

soundtrack. And so, alongside the score from John Powell and Hans Zimmer – who had also worked on the African-inspired smash – he and Tim Rice reunited to create 11 new songs, of which two were lifted as singles. The album did moderate business, but the film mirrored the soundtrack's modest fortunes, failing to pay back its reported budget on its domestic release. John's pick for lead single *Someday Out Of The Blue*, co-written with Madonna collaborator Patrick Leonard, was a sizeable adult-contemporary hit

Elton and Billy Joel during the Face to Face 2002 tour. The two piano men began sharing a stage in 1994; their most recent dates together were in 2010



MUCH OF 2001 APPEARED TO BE FOCUSSED ON THE FACE TO FACE TOUR WITH BILLY JOEL, BUT ELTON LAUNCHED THE YEAR WITH ONE OF HIS MOST CONTROVERSIAL GUEST APPEARANCES, DUETTING WITH EMINEM AT THE GRAMMYS

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stateside, peaking at No. 5, and also securing a scattering of modest European chart entries. A second single, *Friends Never Can Say Goodbye*, featuring uncredited vocals from Backstreet Boys (who lost their billing due to label politics) later peaked at No. 21 in the same listings. Reviews for the project were mixed and the soundtrack remains largely overlooked, while a contribution to US band Collective Soul's album in the form of a track called *Perfect Day* also passed most by in the same year.

The end of 2000 saw the release of *One Night Only* – a 15-song collection recorded live at New York's Madison Square Garden in October and released the following month. The hits-packed set featured guest appearances from Anastacia, Ronan Keating and Mary J Blige on *I Guess That's Why They Call It The Blues*. This was to be among the first of the decade's dizzying volume of repackaged retrospectives, as all labels plundered the back catalogues of their key artists as CD sales slumped. John's songbook would prove rich pickings as Universal absorbed Polygram.

THE ROCKER AND THE RAPPER

If much of 2001 appeared to be focused on the upcoming Face To Face north America tour with Billy Joel, Elton launched the year with one of his most controversial – and memorable – guest appearances, duetting with Eminem on *Stan* at that February's Grammy Awards. While Eminem had enjoyed huge critical and commercial acclaim, he had also incurred the wrath of the gay community with his provocative lyrics. It was a measure of Elton's determination to delve beyond the obvious and make a public stand alongside Eminem that helped restore the younger act's reputation in politer circles and expose the

Far left This cartoon Elton was drawn up by DreamWorks animation for *The Road To Eldorado* movie with its Elton and Tim Rice compositions

Elton always understood Eminem despite the controversy, and underlined his support by performing the Dido line on *Stan* at the 2000 Grammy Awards

© Getty Images

posturing as just part of a performance. Elton had told *Rolling Stone* some years later that the hip-hop star had bought him and his now-husband a set of cock-rings as a gift to mark their union. "So there's homophobe for you," John quipped in familiar good humour as he closed down those still questioning his judgement. In contrast, when his update of *Tumbleweed Connection*'s *Country Comfort* was added to Earl Scruggs' album that year, it attracted barely any attention at all.

In October 2001 the world was in shock, with the 9/11 atrocity barely a month distant. This muted backdrop was the market into which John launched his Grammy-nominated *Songs From The West Coast*, restoring his critical – if not commercial – reputation. For the first time, he and Taupin wrote the tracks together, and they asked Patrick Leonard to produce the record. The piano-based set – his 27th studio collection – failed to top a chart anywhere, but it shifted a million copies across Europe and roughly half that in the USA. It launched with the haunting single *I Want Love*, and the memorable video – starring the then-troubled Robert Downey Junior and directed by Sam Taylor-Wood – wrung every drop of pathos from the song's haunting melody. Elton was suitably rewarded with a UK Top 10 placing and another Grammy nod for Best Pop Vocal Performance.

For all its success, the single surprisingly stalled just outside the Billboard Hot 100, thus depriving John of an entry on that chart across the 12 months for the first time in 31 years. This was despite its showcase at The 9/11 Concert For New York City, which also saw John duet with Billy Joel on *Your Song*.

Further singles *This Train Don't Stop There Anymore* and *Original Sin* were supported with stop-in-your-tracks videos. The former featured Justin Timberlake's much-admired interpretation of Elton John during the Seventies, but it still failed to help the single to chart. *Original Sin*'s video featured a star turn from Dame Elizabeth Taylor, Mandy Moore and even David LaChapelle on direction duties, but once again the song struggled to cut through. Despite Patrick Leonard's pop sensibilities, the record's introspective mood was entirely fitting for the moment and critics were appreciative of the noticeable upswing in John's writing confidence. *Songs From The West Coast* would earn him his best notices in decades.

REISSUES AND REINVENTIONS

The following year's release schedule was to be dominated by a reissue programme. *Songs From The West Coast* got a repress and came packaged with a disc of bonus remixes and B-sides. Just in time for the Christmas market came *Greatest Hits 1970-2002*,

POP_UP John co-wrote *I Don't Feel Like Dancin'* with Scissor Sisters' Babydaddy and Jake Shears. It gave the band their first international chart-topper, but the song failed to break into the Billboard Hot 100

three discs cherry-picking the hits from John's back catalogue yet again. The collection had different UK and Europe track-listings, with both benefitting from a bonus disc of oddities. In the UK, one of these – a duet with Italian pop tenor Alessandro Safina on *Your Song* – landed John back in the Top 5 and earned him another silver disc.

That Christmas also saw him achieve another surprise chart-topper when an appearance on boy band Blue's cover of his *Sorry Seems To Be The Hardest Word* offered him seven more days at the summit. He also teamed up with Lulu on a cover of the Womacks' *Teardrops* for her *Together* duets album.

2003 was to throw up the unlikeliest of curveballs. The Thom Bell-produced *Are You Ready For Love* from 1977 was a perennial dance favourite, bubbling away at the edges of the dance radar until a remix by DJ Ashley Beedle brought it back sharply into focus. Its 1979 No. 42 chart peak was dramatically eclipsed on this reissue when, first on vinyl and then on a plethora of CD and DVD formats, it topped the listings in the UK and across Europe, making No. 1 on the US Billboard Dance Club Play chart as well. Its looping, hypnotic melody sounded classic and contemporary at the same time and became one of the world's best-selling singles that year, in part down to an animated overlay to the track's original low-fidelity promotional video.

A REMIX BY DJ ASHLEY BEEDLE OF 1977'S *ARE YOU READY FOR LOVE* SOUNDED CLASSIC AND CONTEMPORARY AT THE SAME TIME, AND IT BECAME ONE OF THE WORLD'S BEST SELLING SINGLES THAT YEAR

A remix EP of other classic tracks, including *Rocket Man*, was assembled in the confident glow of such a huge hit. A contribution to the soundtrack of the Julia Roberts vehicle *Mona Lisa Smile, The Heart Of Every Girl*, rounded off this very successful year. The John and Taupin original was produced by Trevor Horn but largely ignored as the film surprisingly failed to find much of an audience, but the song did make a modest splash on the stateside Adult Contemporary listings, peaking at No. 24.

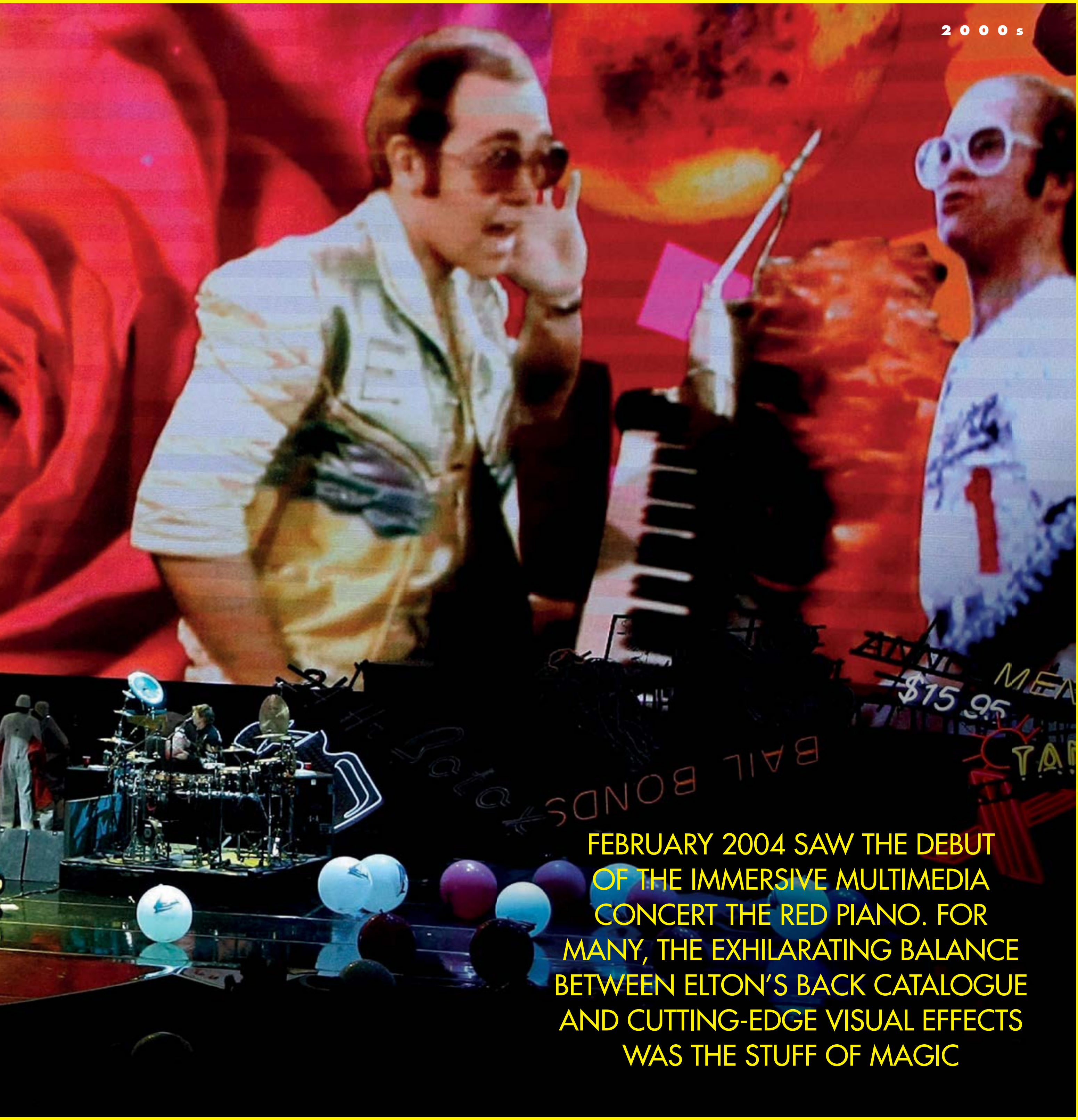
Robert Downey Jr in the famous one-take video for Elton's *I Want Love*, directed by Sam Taylor-Wood. John had previously guided Downey into rehab, and this five-minute job kickstarted his comeback

© Getty Images

ATLANTA TO LAS VEGAS

The following year saw Elton taking a bold new move by solely producing one of his own albums for the first time. *Peachtree Road*, recorded in Atlanta and Los Angeles, was named after an Atlanta landmark near one of his homes. It was the singer's 28th studio set, and it was instantly clear that he had been paying attention to contemporary country and was firmly rooted in the Americana he loved. The cover shot – a railway crossing in the Atlanta suburb of Douglasville – was another offering from Sam Taylor-Wood, and it's possible that the bold but rather less than commercial image served to depress the album's sales, which were already hampered by limited radio interest in the singles. *Answer In The Sky* kicked off the US campaign, while elsewhere *All That I'm Allowed (I'm Thankful)* and *Turn The Lights Out When You Leave* made only limited inroads. The stateside Adult Contemporary charts proved receptive enough, but impact elsewhere was light and the set peaked at No. 17 in the US and No. 21 in the UK. It was clear the stripped-back simplicity of Elton John's current approach was out of step with commercial radio's demands, but feedback from critics and the faithful was again largely positive.

None of this, however, appeared to harm the singer's enduring appeal as a live draw. If anything was to define his decade, it was perhaps his arrival at the entertainment mecca of Las Vegas. February 2004 saw the debut of *The Red Piano*, an immersive



FEBRUARY 2004 SAW THE DEBUT OF THE IMMERSIVE MULTIMEDIA CONCERT THE RED PIANO. FOR MANY, THE EXHILARATING BALANCE BETWEEN ELTON'S BACK CATALOGUE AND CUTTING-EDGE VISUAL EFFECTS WAS THE STUFF OF MAGIC

multimedia concert created in collaboration with David LaChapelle. The show alternated dates with Celine Dion, and the staggering success of its initial run later led John to take the production overseas. For many, the exhilarating balance between his highly-regarded back catalogue and the most cutting edge of visual effects was the stuff of magic, offering plenty to look at it while the showman stayed largely immobile at the instrument that helped make his name.

But John was still also creating new material. A solo version of *Makin' Whoopee* (a standard he had borrowed for the *Big Dipper* album track on *A Single Man*) turned up in the British film *Shoreditch*, which sank without trace in 2003. The song was later added to a 2004 Christmas compilation for Best Buy and reworked as a duet with Rod Stewart's fourth edition of *The Great American Songbook* in 2005. On the charts, that year had been relatively quiet until Tupac Shakur's management released the late artist's *Tiny Dancer*-sampling *Ghetto Gospel*. It took Elton John back to the top of the UK charts for the second time in three years.

STAGE DIRECTIONS

The next two musical theatre projects Elton turned his attention to were greeted with very different receptions. *Billy Elliot* had been a smash-hit movie on its release in 2000. The singer was inspired by the powerful story of a boy brought up in a British mining community, struggling to find an outlet for his

The final performance of *The Red Piano* at The Colosseum at Caesars Palace on April 22, 2009 in Las Vegas. John played 241 concerts in the room since he began his run in February 2004

FEELING THE LOVE

LGBTQ+ CHAMPION

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Elton John had grown up behind a mask. The costumed theatrics of his stadium sets across the Seventies masking a crippling stage insecurity; the professional self-preservation kicking into gear for promotional performances while under the influence of drink and drugs and, yes, perhaps that 1984 marriage; an attempt to channel genuine feelings into something they probably weren't.

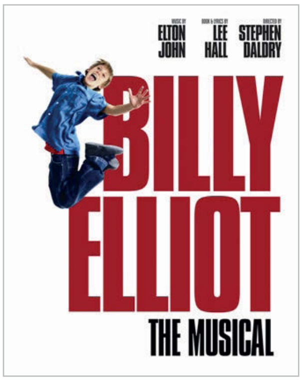
By the start of the new millennium, John was happier than he had been in years. His relationship with David Furnish had ignited in 1993 and offered the star a security and consistency that had hitherto been absent. The public's acceptance of the fact that their cherished pop icon was a gay man had built gently, first establishing itself as a theme of John's more complex personal life with the revelation in 1976 to *Rolling Stone* that he was bisexual.

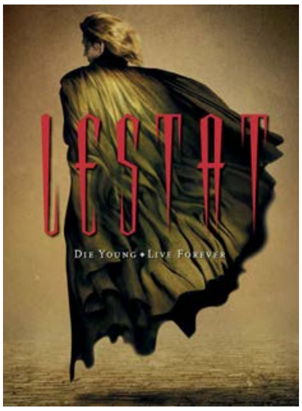
If the public's perception of John's time away from his music in the Nineties had been dominated by charity work – the Princess Diana tribute single and his AIDS Foundation – a similar measure of his Noughties would be defined by a more open relationship with the press and the public. Attitudes were changing and John was keen to push the more welcoming climate towards further acceptance for LGBTQ people. He reportedly proposed to his partner in May 2005, taking advantage of an upcoming change to British law that, for the first time, allowed gay people to register in a civil partnership.

Choosing the day the legislation became law to hold the ceremony was a calculated move designed to showcase the pair's commitment and also position them as Britain's most high-profile gay couple. The motivation was simple: legislation is one thing; hearts and minds always need to understand the human story.

The ceremony at Windsor's Guildhall had all the atmosphere of a royal wedding. Crowds lined the streets to congratulate the pair and press coverage was overwhelmingly positive. It was the most striking example yet of John using his extraordinary platform to influence our culture, all carried out with his customary good humour. Such a display would have been impossible to imagine just a couple of decades earlier and doubtless did much to speed up sympathetic public opinion, inevitably helping to shape an improvement in many gay people's lives.

Today, John carries the office of statesmanlike cultural icon with genuine grace and, as his own personal life has developed – a wedding in December 2014 and the birth of the couple's two sons – he remains committed to the causes that have shaped his philanthropic focus. Raising a fortune for charitable causes across the years might have been enough, but letting his mask slip and exposing his private life to the world did just as much good.





The runaway success of *Billy Elliot The Musical* – which grabbed four Oliviers and went on to tour extensively around the world – eclipsed the good work Elton and Bernie did on the score of *Lestat*

dreams. The emotional punch of the project was, rightly, considered to land a sure-fire hit if it could be successfully transferred to the intimacy of a live theatre. John composed all the music and the show's official opening at the Victoria Palace Theatre, London, on 11 May 2005 was billed an immediate critical and commercial triumph. One of the show's most memorable songs, *Electricity*, was added to a repackage of *Peachtree Road* and the single peaked at No. 4 in the UK chart. *Billy Elliot The Musical* became a box-office sensation, transferring to Broadway in 2008 and playing around the world. Its West End run was to last almost 11 years.

Lestat: The Musical suffered a very different fate. John was a fan of Anne Rice's hit novel *Interview With A Vampire*, and this was to be the first time he and Taupin collaborated on a musical theatre project. After a brief run at the Curran Theatre in San Francisco, the show's transfer to Broadway's Palace Theatre was agreed and it opened at the end of March 2006 but closed just two months later. The critics weren't kind, and the production was only rewarded with a light dusting of Tony nominations. A cast soundtrack remains unreleased.

But as those storm clouds gathered, Elton used a change in UK law to make a very public declaration about his personal life. He entered into a civil partnership with David Furnish on the day ceremonies were launched in Windsor, near the couple's home. If the event became something of a media circus, the statement it was making was entirely deliberate, with Elton claiming he had never been so happy. In a sign of changing attitudes, the vast majority of the UK appeared happy to celebrate with him that December.

And if *Lestat*'s inglorious reception was to sour the start of 2006, the following year saw the release of one of John and Taupin's most ambitious albums to date in *The Captain And The Kid*. His second autobiographical project, it picked up where *Captain Fantastic And The Brown Dirt Cowboy* had paused 31 years earlier. Detailing his and Taupin's story across the past three decades, the slight haul of 10 songs (with an 11th added to UK editions) had the challenge of matching that earlier album's enormous achievements and, at times, appeared overwhelmed by the brief. Rows with the record label over promotion and a mixed set of reviews didn't help, but the album was a modest success, peaking at No. 18 in the US and No. 6 in the UK. *Tinderbox* secured a promo release as a CD single, an evocative video and some radio play in the UK, while *The Bridge* was used more widely internationally to help spark sales.

Sadly, two long-standing members of Elton's band were to make final appearances on one of their mentor's albums with this project. Guy Babylon's

Elton, never one for undercelebrating, marks his special day with a record-breaking 60th birthday concert at Madison Square Garden

© Getty Images

career as one of the world's best keyboard players ended on his death of a heart attack just three years later, while Bob Birch would continue to play for Elton (and contribute to 2011's *Gnomeo And Juliet* soundtrack) before taking his own life in 2012.

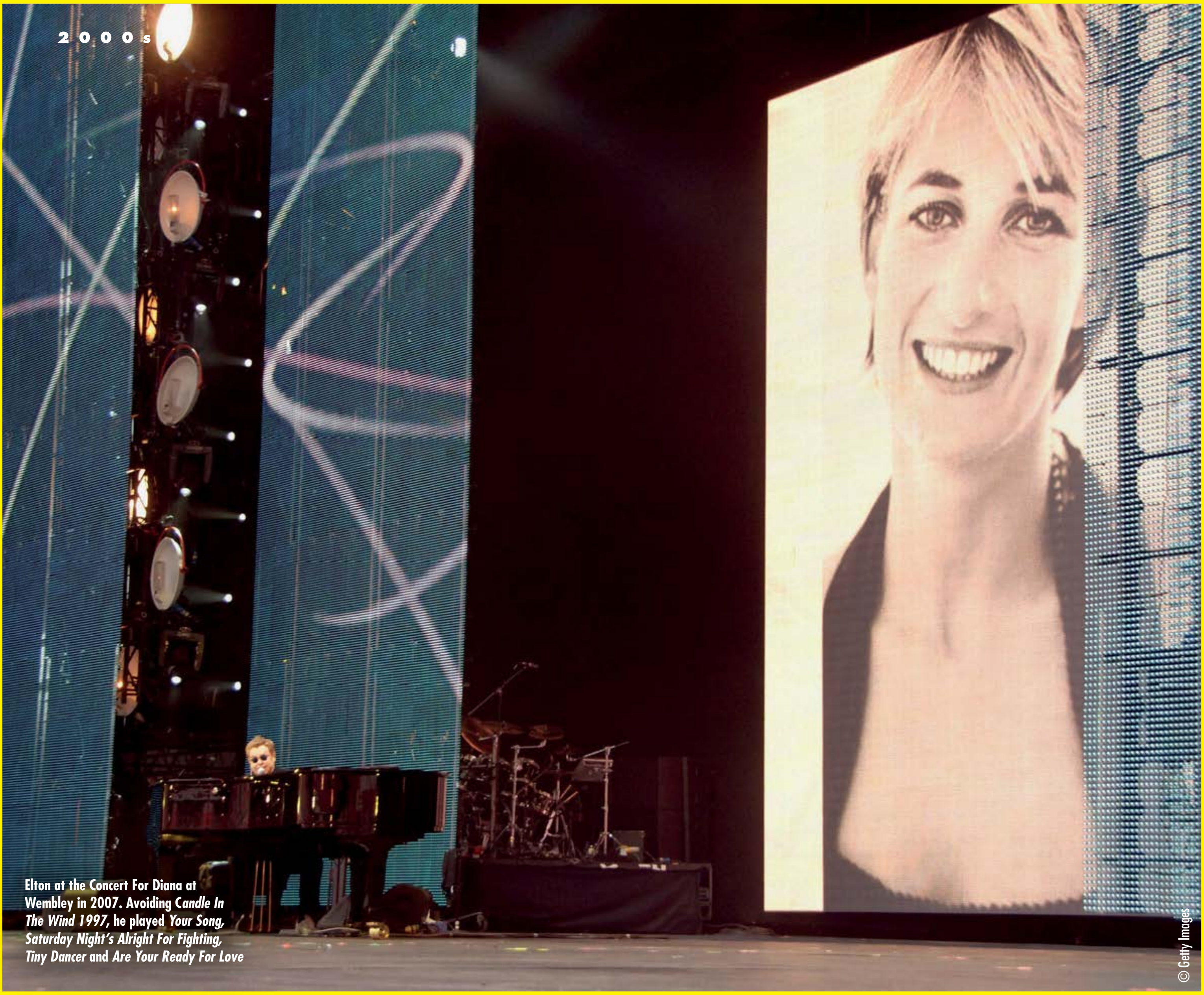
There were reports that John was next going to turn his attention to creating an R&B record, then the world's most successful genre of pop music. In fact, the next record project would be a wider issue for *Elton John's Christmas Party* – originally issued through Starbucks the previous year – that saw him duet with Joss Stone on a new Taupin collaboration, *Calling It Christmas*.

No doubt, 2006 had proved a 12 months of mixed fortune – the challenging reception for *Lestat* contrasting recognition by Disney (evidenced by the corporation's 'Legend Award' offered for his work on their films that October); the commitment to philanthropy (he joined Vegas colleague Celine Dion in benefit concerts for hurricane victims), while the muted reviews for *The Captain And The Kid* dampened his credibility as someone who could still shift CDs.

IN MARCH 2007, ELTON TURNED 60. IT WAS INEVITABLE THAT A COMPILATION WOULD MARK THE OCCASION, AND HE CELEBRATED HIS BIRTHDAY WITH A SPECIAL CONCERT AT MADISON SQUARE GARDEN

In March 2007, Elton turned 60. It was perhaps inevitable that another compilation would mark the occasion, but *Rocket Man: The Definitive Hits* was the most comprehensive and credible to date. Its staggering sales – going platinum by the decade's end in the UK and selling more than 2,000,000 in the US across the following 10 years – was vindication, perhaps, that the vaults were still worth revisiting. John celebrated his birthday with a special concert at Madison Square Garden that secured its own issue as a DVD/CD package. His live schedule kept him busy for the following year – the highlight of which was his appearance at that summer's Concert For Diana tribute at Wembley Stadium, where he opened the show on what would have been his late friend's 46th birthday.

POP_UP Bill Clinton introduced Elton's 60th birthday shows at New York's Madison Square Gardens, and actors Whoopi Goldberg and Robin Williams later joined the singer for a performance of *Daniel*



Elton at the Concert For Diana at Wembley in 2007. Avoiding *Candle In The Wind 1997*, he played *Your Song*, *Saturday Night's Alright For Fighting*, *Tiny Dancer* and *Are Your Ready For Love*

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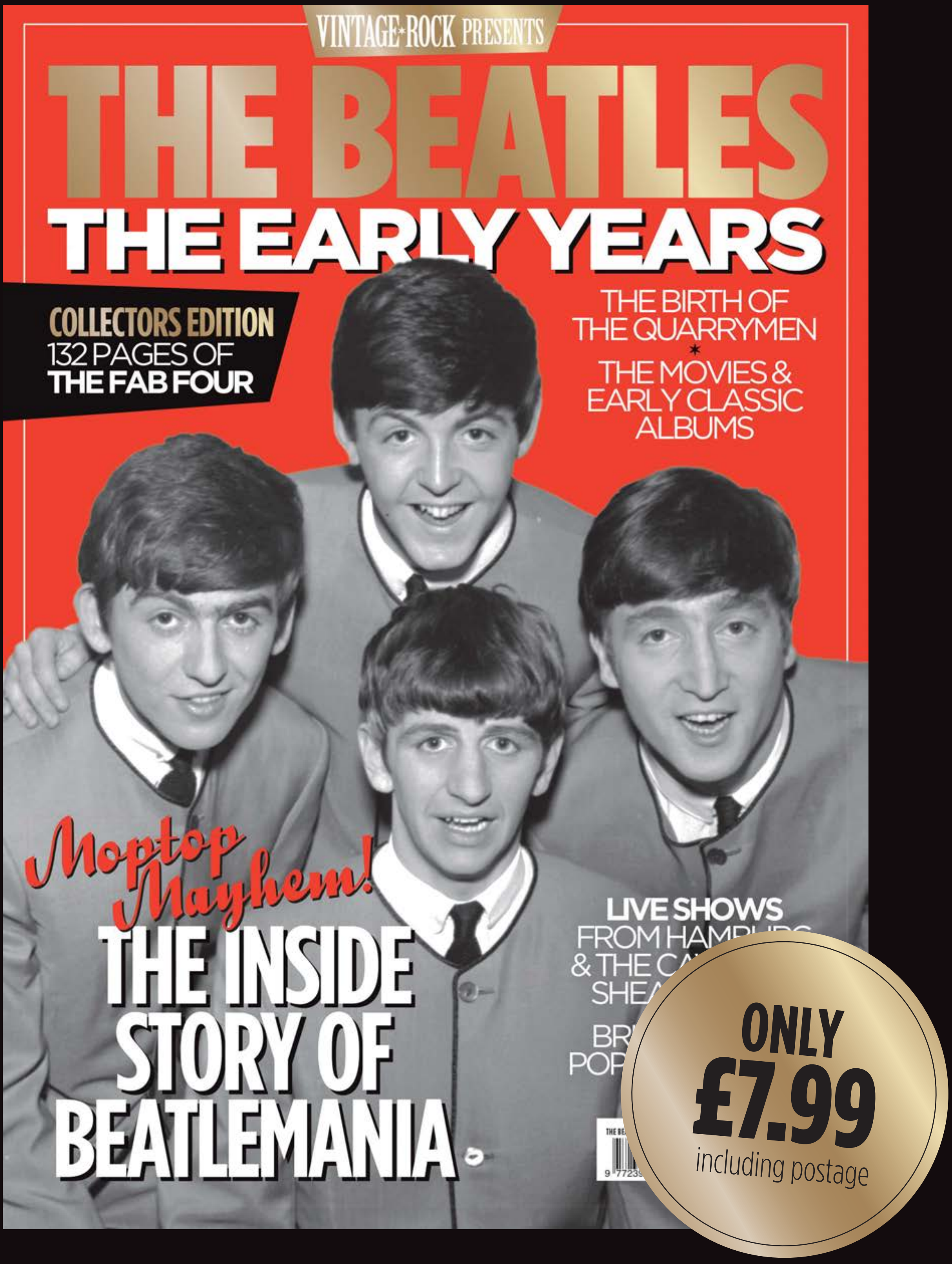
In June 2008, John staged his 200th performance of *The Red Piano* at The Coliseum at Caesars Palace Hotel & Casino. The hits set would stage periodically at the venue until March 2009, but the latter half of the year saw 17 shows across Europe (with a following seven in October 2009). A DVD of the shows also secured an inevitable issue.

If John's own release schedule was slowing towards the end of the decade, then guest appearances continued to keep things interesting. He joined The Killers and Pet Shop Boy Neil Tennant on the festive *Joseph, Better You Than Me* at Christmas 2008 and, the following year, found himself back in the UK singles chart with *Tiny Dancer* once again the core of a contemporary rehash, billed *Tiny Dancer (Hold Me Close)*. With rapper Chipmunk, he took the treatment by DJ Ironik to No. 3 in the UK singles chart. It was a surprise finishing act to a decade of memorable collaborations.

IF ELTON HAD BEGUN THE 2000S LOCKED IN CONFLICT FOR CHART POSITIONS, HE ENDED THE ERA MORE COMFORTABLE THAT THOSE CAMPAIGNS WERE NOW LARGELY BEHIND HIM

The latter half of the Noughties might largely have been dominated by those guest appearances and limited contributions to other projects but, be it a song for Brian Wilson, a knockout posthumous duet with Luther Vandross, a cover of *Alone Again (Naturally)* with Pet Shop Boys, collaborations with Scissor Sisters and Tony Bennett or a contribution to the *Australia* soundtrack, Elton had begun the era still locked in conflict for chart positions and ended it more comfortable that those campaigns were now largely behind him. Elton was still a brand guaranteed to draw attention to a project and, if that threw up another hit, then so be it. So while he might have decided those commercial measures were less critical, then the years ahead would bring greater family commitments and, yes, welcome evidence of a continuing appetite to keep working and developing his songwriting. He was finally choosing his battles more carefully.

POP_UP The first time John made a serious bid for the US country charts was in 2004 when he worked with Aussie singer Catherine Britt on *Where We Both Say Goodbye*



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CLASSIC POP

DANDY MAN

Terry O'Neil expertly captures a dapper Elton seated by his piano at home in his Wentworth estate in Surrey. The shoot was commissioned for the cover to his 1974 compilation *Greatest Hits*, an album that compiled 10 Elton classics released between 1970-'74. Naturally, it reached the pinnacle on both sides of the pond and, on top of that, was the best-seller of the year in the States – and it's John's highest unit-shifting LP to date.

© Getty Images

CLASSIC POP

BOOT CAMP

Elton on the set of The Who's film *Tommy*, sporting those infamous giant Doc Martens (with stilts concealed inside). Elton agreed to appear as the Pinball Wizard character in the film on the condition that he could keep his oversized footwear. Storage was clearly a problem, however, and the star sold the boots to Doc Martens manufacturers R Griggs Group Ltd in 1988. They are now on display at the Northampton Museum.

© Getty Images

CLASSIC POP

CREATING A BUZZ

As newly-appointed Director of Watford football club, Elton decided to stage a grand show to help fill the coffers of the team. Never one to shy away from the chance of flamboyancy, he appeared at his piano sporting a black and yellow hornet outfit (Watford FC are also known as the Hornets) for the open air concert on May 5th 1974. Scottish hard rockers Nazareth opened the show before Elton took to the stage, backed by the classic Elton John band line-up of Dee Murray, Nigel Ollson and Davey Johnstone – and new recruit Ray Cooper added percussion. Oh, and Rod Stewart also made a guest appearance.

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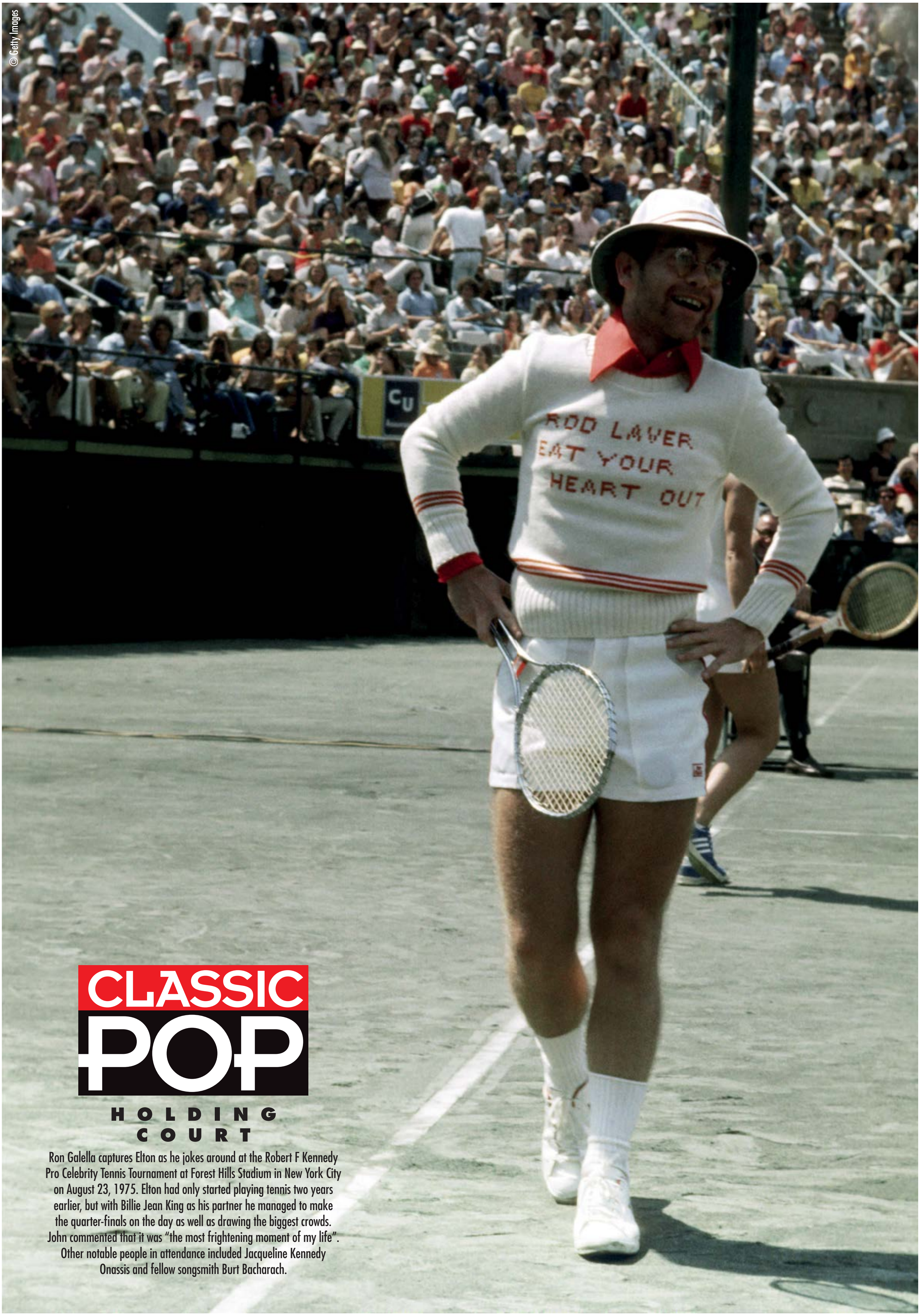


CLASSIC POP

HOLDING COURT

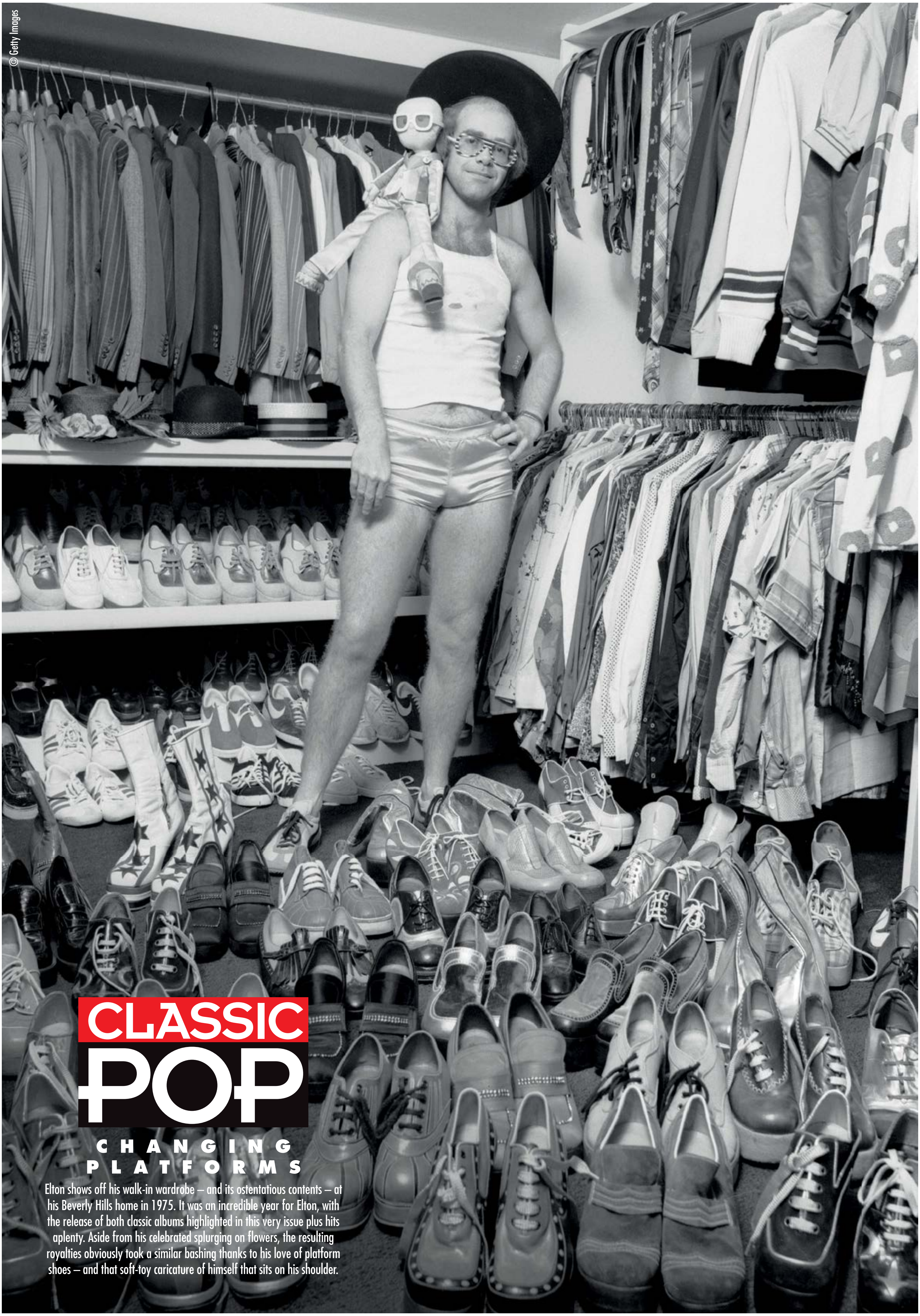
Ron Galella captures Elton as he jokes around at the Robert F Kennedy Pro Celebrity Tennis Tournament at Forest Hills Stadium in New York City on August 23, 1975. Elton had only started playing tennis two years earlier, but with Billie Jean King as his partner he managed to make the quarter-finals on the day as well as drawing the biggest crowds. John commented that it was "the most frightening moment of my life". Other notable people in attendance included Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis and fellow songsmith Burt Bacharach.

© Getty Images

CLASSIC POP

TWO HEARTS

3rd August, 1977 and Elton and Kiki Dee duet on their UK No. 1 *Don't Go Breaking My Heart* at the Dr. Pepper Festival in Central Park, New York City. The pair look surprisingly fresh-faced considering the previous night was spent with her band in tow celebrating at the Rocket Records Party at the One Fifth Restaurant in Manhattan. Kiki had supported Elton on both his 1973 UK tour and again on his US tour the following year.



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CHANGING PLATFORMS

Elton shows off his walk-in wardrobe – and its ostentatious contents – at his Beverly Hills home in 1975. It was an incredible year for Elton, with the release of both classic albums highlighted in this very issue plus hits aplenty. Aside from his celebrated splurging on flowers, the resulting royalties obviously took a similar bashing thanks to his love of platform shoes – and that soft-toy caricature of himself that sits on his shoulder.

FREE REIGN

THIS DECADE HAS BROUGHT ELTON JOHN THE CHANCE TO WORK WITH A LIFELONG MUSICAL HERO, TO MAKE A TRIUMPHANT RETURN TO LAS VEGAS, TO SNAG AN UNEXPECTED ELECTRO-POP HIT, AND TO GO BACK TO HIS ORIGINAL SMALL-BAND ROOTS. WHAT'S NEXT FOR THE SONG AND PIANO MAN? WATCH THIS SPACE…

IAN RAVENDALE

Zachary, Elton and David Furnish's first son was born via surrogacy on Christmas Day, 2010. Second son Elijah followed on 11 January 2013, also via surrogacy. But not even parenthood could stand in the way of Elton's ferocious work schedule. The Elton John Greatest Hits tour started on 14 February 2011 and ran in stages until 21 September 2013, playing a world-wide total of 146 shows, touring Europe, Australasia and North America, both solo and with his band. And, for the first time, Elton performed in Asia in November 2011, playing the Singapore Indoor Stadium in Kallang and Malaysia's Arena Of Stars in the Genting Highlands, a high-altitude hill resort. In February 2012 Elton and his band played the Estadio National, their debut concert in Lima.

EQUAL OPPORTUNITY

The 2010s so far have brought four Elton John albums, a tally that will undoubtedly be added to before the decade ends. What's more, the albums have been vastly different to each other, showing that John isn't interested in standing still and only takes on projects that challenge or inspire him.

The first of these, *The Union*, an album collaboration between Elton and Leon Russell, was released in October 2010 and went Top Five in the US. Elton first heard Russell on 1969's Delaney And Bonnie

The proud father: Sir Elton John holds his son Zachary, born to a surrogate mother on 25 December 2010

© Getty Images

David Furnish, Elijah, Zachary and Sir Elton at Elton's AIDS Foundation Academy Awards Viewing Party in February, 2015

© Getty Images

POP_UP *Gnomeo And Juliet*, the animated film produced by Elton and husband David Furnish, cost $34,000,000 but took nearly $200,000,000 at the box office

album *Accept No Substitute* and was more than a little gob-smacked by his piano playing, remarking: "I just went through the roof. I nearly retired. I figured there wasn't much point in playing anymore."

On 25 August 1970 Elton gave his debut US concert at The Troubadour in Los Angeles. Russell was in the audience for the following night's show. "Leon Russell was in the front row but I didn't see him until the last number," Elton related to Paul Gambaccini in 1974. "Thank God I didn't, because I regarded him as some kind of god. I saw him and just stopped! He said 'Keep on!' and 'Come up to the house tomorrow.' I figured he was going to tie me up and whip me and say 'Listen here, you bastard, this is how to play the piano!', but he was really nice instead. It was like a schoolboy's fantasies come true!"

In the early Seventies Russell had been band leader for Joe Cocker's legendary Mad Dogs And Englishmen tour. Also on his CV was a spell as part of Phil Spector's army of studio musicians; he had recorded with The Rolling Stones (and Frank Sinatra), produced Bob Dylan, had his own Shelter record label, and was one of the all-star cast for George Harrison's Concert For Bangladesh. Several of his songs – notably the Bonnie Bramlett co-write *Superstar* and *A Song For You* (possibly the inspiration for *Your Song*) – had been covered by various acts, most famously The Carpenters.

Russell and John toured together later in 1970. Speaking on Elvis Costello's *Spectacle: Elvis Costello with…* TV show in 2008, he said: "It was the most magical of times because here was my idol accepting me. It meant the world to me that someone that I admired so much could show me such generosity. It helped validate me by saying: 'Well, if he thinks I'm alright, I must be alright because he's my hero.'"

PICK A BONE

Prior to *The Union* album, Russell and John hadn't been in contact with each other for 35 years, and the renowned American keyboard player/singer-songwriter was surprised to hear from the Englishman. After their chat Elton obtained the number of record producer T Bone Burnett (who has worked on albums with Bob Dylan, Counting Crows, Elvis Costello and many others), and rang him. Introductory niceties done with, Elton told T Bone what an influence Leon had been on his music and then asked whether he'd be interested in producing a duet album with them. Burnett immediately agreed and Elton rang Leon back and proposed that the two of them record together. Initially John had to persuade Russell that he was certain the Tennessee legend was more than capable. Having Burnett on board to produce helped, and Russell agreed to do it.

Recording for *The Union* kicked off in January 2010 following writing sessions that started on 20 November 2009, exactly 39 years after the pair's 1970 debut at New York's Fillmore East as part of the US tour where Elton played supporting Leon. Speaking to the *New York Times*, Elton admitted that his prime motivation for the project with Russell was to bring the music of one of his earliest influences to a wider audience while at the same time helping him out: "If Leon can get the accolades he deserves and be financially OK for the rest of his life, I will have done something decent with my music."

Russell had kept on playing and recording since the Seventies, but did his best to retreat from the media circus. As he told the *New York Times*: "I've avoided the press and a lot of stuff that would have made me more visible. When I see all the stuff that Elton does, I can understand why I'm not doing that more."

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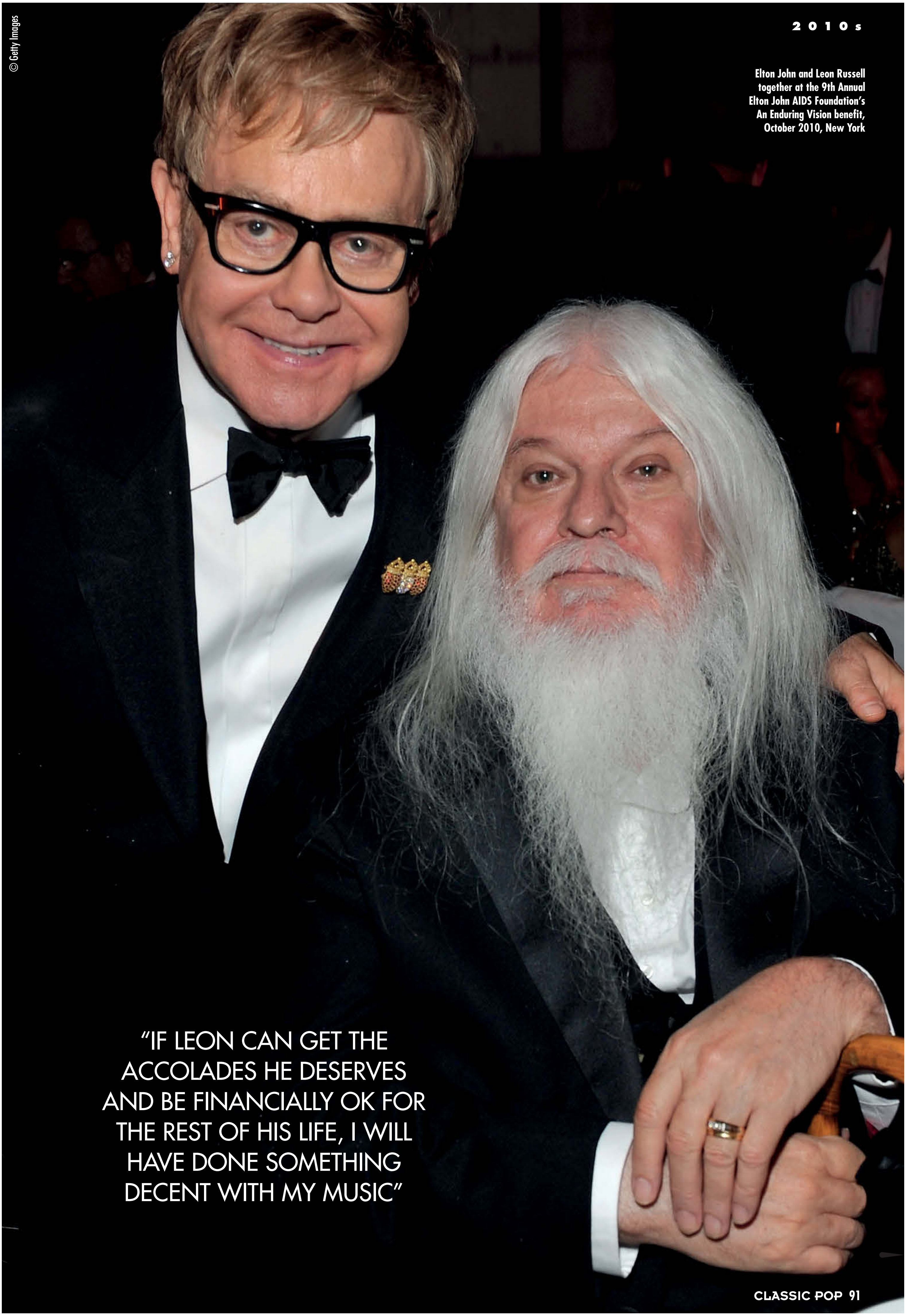


Elton John and Leon Russell together at the 9th Annual Elton John AIDS Foundation's An Enduring Vision benefit, October 2010, New York

"IF LEON CAN GET THE ACCOLADES HE DESERVES AND BE FINANCIALLY OK FOR THE REST OF HIS LIFE, I WILL HAVE DONE SOMETHING DECENT WITH MY MUSIC"

KEY TRACKS

2010 AND BEYOND

IN THE HANDS OF ANGELS
THE UNION (2010)
ELTON JOHN AND LEON RUSSELL

Aware that recording and touring with Elton John would bring him a whole new audience, Leon Russell wanted to say thanks. After the pair had performed Neil Young's *Helpless* together as part of the Grammy Musicare tribute to the Canadian singer/songwriter, Leon decided to write Elton a song. *In The Hands Of Angels*, the final track on *The Union*, has more than a touch of traditional country and western to it and tells the story behind the album. The track is sung predominantly by Russell, who sounds like he's still not totally recovered from his medical procedures; his voice is fragile, but dripping with emotion. Church-like organ and ethereal female backing vocals bring the hymn-like song to a powerful climax. "When he played that, we just lost it," Elton confessed to the *New York Times*: "Nobody has ever written me a song before! He said; 'I want to thank you for saying my life'. And I just burst into tears."

GOOD MORNING TO THE NIGHT
GOOD MORNING TO THE NIGHT (2012)
ELTON JOHN VERSUS PNAU

The remix album that restored John's credibility and brought him a whole new, younger audience, albeit one more inclined to download than buy. Similar projects generally have a significant input from the artist; in this case, Elton said, "Go and do it. Here's the keys to my archive". On remix albums like The Beatles' *Love*, well-known songs were tinkered with, but everything is still totally recognisable. Not so here: Pnau have taken familiar words and instrumental parts which come in and out, but their contexts are totally different to the point of changing the material utterly. The *Good Morning To The Night* track (named after a phrase taken form the *Honky Chateau* LP) was released to coincide with the 2012 London Olympics; Pnau take the lyrics and chop them up with snippets of eight of John's lesser-known Seventies songs and reassembles them to create a boisterous club anthem. Bernie Taupin's lyrics are used more as beats to move and dance to rather than sit and analyse. *NME* gave the album three and a half stars, reckoning that the *Versus* album had "an atmosphere of ghostly melancholy that subtly subverts Elton's reputation as a cosy British institution".

SAD
GOOD MORNING TO THE NIGHT (2012)
ELTON JOHN VERSUS PNAU

As Elton revealed during the album launch, the Pnau remix of tracks from his back catalogue is, he feels, groundbreaking: "It's never been done before. On *Sad*, for example, the lead vocal – the hook of the song – are the backing vocals (which are minimal!) from *Sorry Seems To Be The Hardest Word*. I didn't participate at all. I'm a Luddite – I didn't know how to participate! I just listened to the result! It sounds like something that was made today, but these tracks were made 40 years ago. It's astonishing! I wanted to create a new approach to my material so young people would go: 'My God! I didn't know Elton John sounded like that!'" With its nod to Ibiza psychedelia, *Good Morning To The Night* exposed Elton's music to a whole new audience and gave him his first No. 1 UK album in 22 years.

© Getty Images

POP_UP In December 2014, the month he married David Furnish, Elton had a new, 3000-seater stand named after him at the Watford FC Vicarage Road Stadium

The project with Russell gave Elton his first opportunity to work with T Bone Burnett; the pair have since recorded together on two subsequent albums. Talking to *The Hollywood Reporter,* Elton recalled how Burnett became involved in the project: "I was thinking about who I would want to do the record. I had never met T Bone. I just took a chance phoning him. I loved the records he did with Elvis Costello. *Raising Sand* [by Robert Plant and Alison Krauss] was such a great-sounding record and I thought, let's try T Bone Burnett. I really loved the recording process with him so much because he went back to recording on analogue and it was a different group of musicians that he introduced me to, which was really necessary for me at that time."

FRUIT OF THE UNION

The first song Russell and John wrote and recorded together for The Union was the gospel-styled *A Dream Come True*. *I Should Have Sent Roses* (with lyrics by Bernie Taupin) quickly followed, and within four days the keyboard-slinging duo had written a total of 10 songs. With Brian Wilson and Neil Young also contributing, the *Union* sessions were moving along nicely until recording was abruptly halted in January

Elton and Leon Russell pound the ivories together on *Good Morning America* at the Beacon Theatre in New York City

2010 when Russell was hospitalised and underwent more than five hours of surgery for a brain fluid leak and treatment for heart failure and pneumonia. Just a week later he was back in the studio, delicate but driven on by the music.

To promote the album, between 19 October 2010 and 2 April 2011, the duo played 30 live dates together, finishing off with a memorable appearance on the *Saturday Night Live* TV show – introduced by Tom Hanks.

Leon Russell died on 13 November 2016 at the age of 74, and John was an honorary pallbearer at his funeral. On his Instagram Elton wrote:"He was a mentor, inspiration and so kind to me. Thank God we caught up with each other and made *The Union*. He got his reputation back and felt fulfilled. I loved him and always will. Leon Russell RIP."

"HE WAS A MENTOR, INSPIRATION AND SO KIND TO ME. THANK GOD WE CAUGHT UP WITH EACH OTHER AND MADE *THE UNION*. HE GOT HIS REPUTATION BACK AND FELT FULFILLED. I LOVED HIM"

LIGHT-FINGERED

On 28 September 2011 Elton, his band, and the world's most expensive piano returned to The Colosseum, part of Las Vegas' Caesar's Palace Casino. The cod-Roman arena has also played host to Rod Stewart, Cher, Mariah Carey, Shania Twain and, in particular, Celine Dion, who has performed at the venue more than 1,000 times. Elton's *Million Dollar Piano* show featured a keyboard with more than 68 LED video screens (as created by Yamaha) to allow his instrument to take on the mood of whichever song he was playing at that moment.

To achieve what must be amongst the world's highest tech shows, the lighting was programmed into a control board, the songs were played over and over, and rhythms, moods, lyrics and musical changes were dissected and programmed into the

Elton onstage for his Million Dollar Piano show at Caesar's Palace in Las Vegas, September 2011

Million Dollar Piano's "grand piano" side, where the mammoth video display served up an ever-changing presentation with Versace designs, cherubs, Roman kitsch and thousands of other images, including the *Don't Go Breaking My Heart* video duet with Kiki Dee, all blending into the surrounding stage scenery.

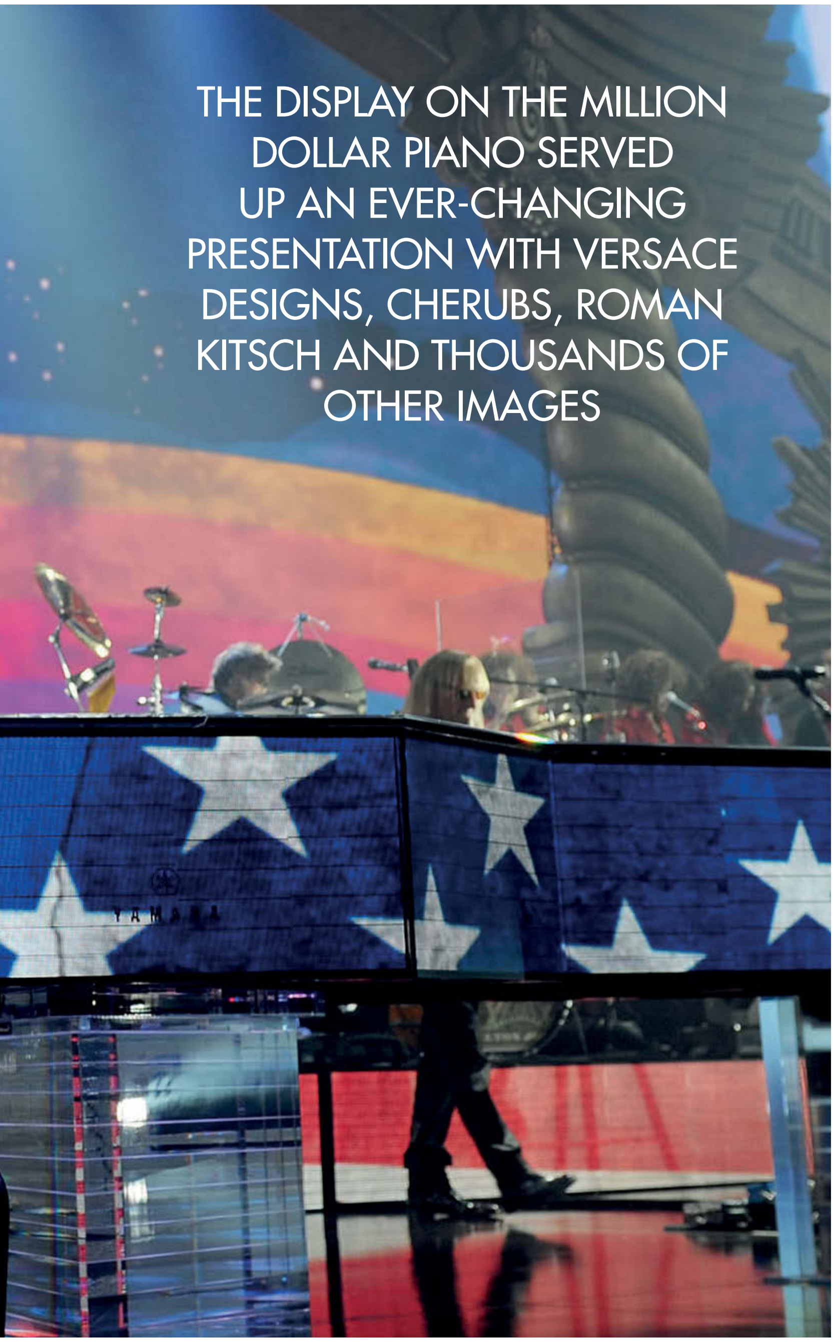
Returning to playing dressy-up, Elton was kitted out as a Smart-piano playing 17th Century Sun King transported to 21st Century Las Vegas. John's five-piece core Vegas band had been expanded to include long-standing percussionist Ray Cooper, cellists Luka Sulic and Stjepan Hauser, and four female singers including Rose Stone of Sly & The Family Stone. Elton and his magic piano will return to the Colosseum in October 2017 to play four shows a week until the start of March 2018.

PNAU IS THE TIME

Elton John's next recording project came even more out of left-field than his collaboration with Leon Russell. 2012's *Good Morning To The Night* by Elton John Versus Pnau teams him with the Australian electro-pop duo that he first heard on his car radio in 2007 when stuck in traffic in Sydney. Elton then went hunting for their albums and on liking what he heard, quickly signed Pnau to his Rocket Music Entertainment Group management company and flew them across to the UK. For the remix album he gave the duo unfettered access to the multitracks of his entire discography and free rein with the master tapes.

"We just owe him so much, I mean, he kind of saved us," said Pnau's Peter Mayes. "He's been a real mentor to us and a good friend too, musically and otherwise. If we're down he'll help us. He's just someone who's there to help. If we write a great track he'll tell us. If we write a bad track he'll tell us. He's very honest and very generous with his time."

The signature electro pop of Pnau also makes Elton's voice sound contemporary and fresh – impressive given the original recordings are from the Seventies and, in a couple of cases, 1969. Avoiding the trap of making a disco-fied version of Elton's Greatest Hits, *Good Morning To The Night* pulls lesser-known songs from John's back catalogue and gives them a new lease of life. Each track on the album is more like a distant cousin that you think you know, but aren't quite sure. Myriad snippets from his early albums are reworked and fly in and out to serve up as a slice of 21st century pop. *Telegraph To The Afterlife* and *Foreign Fields* grab some disco grooves,



THE DISPLAY ON THE MILLION DOLLAR PIANO SERVED UP AN EVER-CHANGING PRESENTATION WITH VERSACE DESIGNS, CHERUBS, ROMAN KITSCH AND THOUSANDS OF OTHER IMAGES

slows the tempo and venture into house music. *Black Icy Stare* is a mashup of *Cold Highway*, *Solar Prestige A Gammon* and *You're So Static*. Elton John anoraks would have a ball trying to identify where everything comes from.

The *Good Morning To The Night* album gave Elton and Pnau a platform to perform live together in 2012 at the 123 Rocktronic Festival in San Antonio in Ibiza, the island's first major three-day music festival. Also appearing at Rocktronic were Chic, Sting, Tinie Tempah, Rob Da Bank, Chase & Status, Fatboy Slim and a gaggle of dance DJs.

"It's astonishing when you look at the credits and see what they've taken from each track – bass from here, drums from there, backing vocals from wherever," said Elton about the job his Australian protégées did on the Versus project. "They've created a new genre of music!" "We took a conceptual art approach," explains Pnau's Nick Littlemore. "We put everything on paper and went through 400 songs, made notes, drew pictures and wrote stories and thought about how we could take this genius material and breathe new life into it." Mayes summed it up: "It's about finding the things you only find by delving deep into someone's catalogue."

KEY TRACKS

2010 AND BEYOND

OSCAR WILDE GETS OUT

THE DIVING BOARD (2013)

On receiving Bernie's parcel of lyrics for *The Diving Board* album, the words Elton was initially most struck by were those for *Oscar Wilde Gets Out*, and he consequently worked on that song first. Elton's piano parts are repetitious and only occasionally livened up by stabbing strings. He perhaps thought the song's music was secondary and didn't want it to get in the way of Taupin's lyrics.

The song finds Victorian playwright looking back after his release from Reading prison in 1897 on completion of two years hard labour for homosexual offences with Lord Alfred "Bosie" Douglas. Wilde then moved to France under an assumed name and wrote his last work, *The Ballad Of Reading Gaol*, a long poem about the harshness of prison life. Taupin's opening line immediately pulls us in and lets us know how much more enlightened most of the world has thankfully become in the last 100 plus years when Elton sings: "Freedom for the scapegoat leaving Reading Jail". He then hints at how flimsy some 21st century attitudes can be: "Thinking how beauty deceives you/ Knowing how love fools us all". Taupin delivers a final killer payoff with Wilde coming to realise that "the hardened lifers" and "the wretched poor" he mixed with in prison were his "saviours" and that he'll "miss them all".

References to Wilde's classic poem appear in a number of other works, including DW Griffiths' 1916 silent movie *Intolerance, A Clockwork Orange* by Anthony Burgess, and Eugene O'Neill's play *Ah, Wilderness!* Libertines frontman Pete Doherty, no stranger himself to the sound of a key turning in a lock, wrote the song *Broken Love Song* partially inspired by *The Ballad Of Reading Gaol*.(

WONDERFUL CRAZY NIGHT

WONDERFUL CRAZY NIGHT (2016)

The *Wonderful Crazy Night* title track is Elton at his boogie woogie best, with Taupin lyrics that reflect on simpler times: "Some things you don't forget/ Some things just take a hold". Bernie then reminisces about when all that was needed was "Loose clothes and a cool, cool drink/ A greasy breeze from the chicken stand". The hook of the song is a catchy Elton piano part coupled with some roller-coaster keyboard fireworks and a jazzy solo that wouldn't be out of place in *Honky Cat* or *Crocodile Rock*. In contrast to *The Diving Board* , the mood of the album is as a record to dance to and have fun with rather than sit down and think about. The *Wonderful Crazy Night* album sounds more spontaneous than any of Elton's other releases this decade, as he and the band simply went in and laid the tracks down in a couple of takes, with minimal overdubbing.

© Getty Images

VLAD THE IMPOSTOR

THE KNIGHT AND THE PRESIDENT

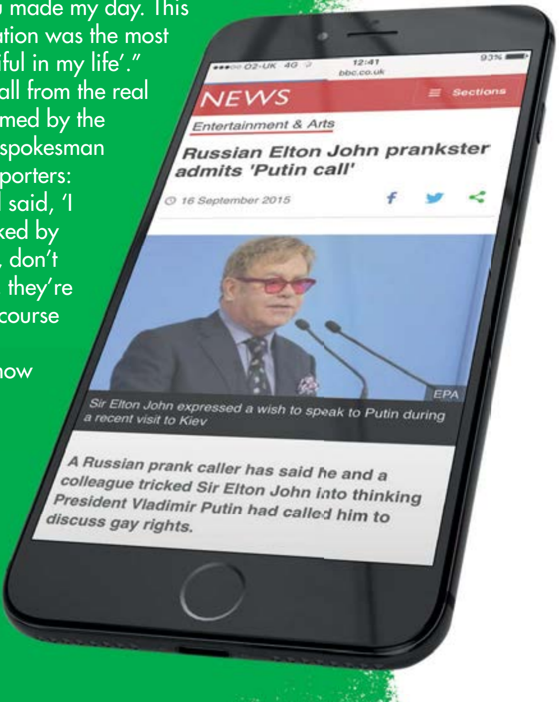
In September 2015 Elton John spoke on the telephone about gay rights to Russia's President Vladimir Putin – or so he thought. The reality was John been hoaxed by two pranksters, a Russian comedy duo by the names of Vova and Lexus.

The pair pretended to be Putin and his translator and got Elton to take their call. He'd been trying to get an audience with Putin to advocate LGBT rights in Russia for several months, and understandably fell for the hoax. Elton then became engaged in a war of words with the president after publicly thanking the leader for "reaching out" to him, a conversation the Kremlin denied happened.

John maintained that Putin, who recently appeared to equate homosexuality with paedophilia and urged gay people to "leave kids alone", had called him and suggested they might meet. TV show hosts Vladimir Krasnov and Alexei Stolyarov (aka Vova and Lexus) claimed it was them that called Elton after he told the BBC that – following a meeting with Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko – he looked forward to a meeting with Putin. "I'm a musician and a philanthropic person and a humanitarian," Elton told the BBC. "I'm not a politician, but I would love to sit down with the president and discuss things face to face because I think Putin's attitude to gay people was isolating and prejudiced and ridiculous. It's probably pie in the sky but I'd love to meet him and say, 'Come on, let's have a cup of tea, let's talk about this'. He may laugh behind my back when he shuts the door, and call me an absolute idiot, but at least I can think I have the conscience to say I tried."

The two pranksters appeared on Russian TV the following night and played two short excerpts from the conversation, including Elton saying he was honoured to speak to Mr Putin and explaining that he wanted only to appeal for fair treatment on behalf of the LGBT. "We think that Putin is unlikely to want to meet with him," said Krasnov. "It turned out that Elton John was waiting for that call. He said: 'Thank you. You made my day. This day and the conversation was the most wonderful and beautiful in my life'."

Then, Elton got a call from the real Vladimir Putin, confirmed by the Kremlin. Presidential spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters: "Putin called him and said, 'I know you were pranked by those telephone guys, don't be offended by them, they're harmless, but that of course doesn't excuse them.' Putin said he knows how popular a performer Elton John is. If in the future their schedules allow, he's ready to meet with him and discuss any questions that interest him."



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Above: Peter Mayes and Nick Littlemore of Pnau join Elton onstage at the Ibiza 123 festival in 2012

Right: Elton duets with Demi Lovato on *Don't Go Breaking My Heart* on January 13, 2016 at the Wiltern in LA

THE DEEP END

Having 40 years' worth of hits means that Elton is in the enviable position of being able to do whatever he wants musically, as he did when he got Pnau on board for *Good Morning To The Night*. Follow-up record *The Diving Board* couldn't have been any more different, and proved to be one of John's most problematic albums. Originally planned for the autumn of 2012, the release date was pushed back on a number of occasions, with *Rolling Stone* magazine revealing Elton was dissatisfied with the creative balance of the album. He had concluded that many of the songs had themes that he thought needed to be consolidated with more material that considered similar viewpoints and took comparable approaches. Working with Leon Russell had given Elton a very different outlook that was away from the pop treadmill and towards making music that was honest and more personal.

In a move designed to make sure the lyrical content wasn't obscured, T Bone Burnett went for a sparse and clean production style which has shades of the Americana-tinged albums of Elton's earlier career like *Tumbleweed Connection*, driven by Bernie Taupin's obsession with the Wild West. *The Diving Board* echoes this and also calls on historical subject matter such as Oscar Wilde's imprisonment for homosexual offences and, on *Oceans Away*, World War Two. The latter song is a poignant tribute to Taupin's father and all the other young men who were sent off to fight in the war and the many souls that didn't come back.

With the album getting some of the most positive reviews of his career, *The Diving Board* is the singer/songwriter back to his creative peak. Talking to *The Hollywood Reporter*, Elton elaborated on what T Bone Burnett had brought to the album: "He suggested going back to the piano, bass and drums that I made my name with – live, anyway – and I'd never done that done on record.

"I'd never have thought of it in a million years! That's what you need in a producer… someone who picks out the best of what you do.

© Getty Images

"T Bone is the guy. We have so much fun. It's a very easy process and so relaxed in the studio. He has the incredible knack of throwing the right musicians into the mix, and he has a huge pool of them that he uses. *The Diving Board* is the most stripped-down record I've ever made, and the most piano-orientated."

Having recorded more than 30 albums since his debut in 1969 with *Empty Sky*, Elton has a clear idea as to the sort of records he wants to produce these days: "I'm not about making pop records anymore. I'm about trying to improve as a piano player and singer and he [Burnett] is the guy who can help me do that."

> "I'M NOT ABOUT MAKING POP RECORDS ANYMORE. I'M ABOUT TRYING TO IMPROVE AS A PIANO PLAYER AND SINGER AND T BONE BURNETT IS THE GUY WHO CAN HELP ME DO THAT"

CRAZY NIGHTS

In January and April 2015 Elton recorded 14 songs for his next album *Wonderful Crazy Night* at the Village studios in Los Angeles over 17 days. Musicians at the session included John's original drummer Nigel Olsson and Davey Johnstone, guitarist in the Elton John band since 1971 – neither of whom had played with John for almost a decade. Elton also performed at 104 concerts and private events and played in 20 countries over the year, starting in Honolulu, Hawaii on 10 January and finishing on 19 December at the Quantas Credit Union Arena, Sydney, Australia – the final show before the venue was demolished. Two of Elton's 2015 appearances were as a surprise musical guest at a pair of Ed Sheeran concerts, one at London's Wembley Stadium and the other at the Allianz Stadium in Sydney, Australia. Elton and Ed – who is managed by Elton's Rocket Music company – duetted on *Don't Go Breaking My Heart* and Sheeran's *Afire Love*.

Elton's 32nd studio album *Wonderful Crazy Night* was released on 5 February 2016. It became Elton's 31st UK Top 10 charting album and the latest step in the continued evolution of a singer/songwriter who is constantly growing as a recording artist. While John and Taupin have a very identifiable songwriting style and Elton's vocals are instantly recognisable, he never makes the same record twice.

Wonderful Crazy Night is Elton's third project with co-producer T Bone Burnett after *The Union* and *The Diving Board*. Where the former was a tribute to one of Elton's prime musical influences and the latter heavy on thoughtful ballads, *Wonderful Crazy Night* echoes the good-time records he made in the early Seventies such as *Tumbleweed Connection* and *Honky Chateau*, with Burnett demonstrating that he's more than capable of stepping into the production shoes of the late Gus Dudgeon, Elton's longtime producer.

Now 70 years old, Elton John shows absolutely no signs of slowing down and is still clearly completely committed to what he's doing, as he told *The Hollywood Reporter*: "All I want to do is enjoy my music. I still love playing live.

"What I do – particularly on new records – doesn't translate to what I'm gonna do in an arena because people just want to hear the hits. As long as I'm trying to write better songs and the vocal and piano are getting better, I'm not going to stop."

POP_UP Elton and his mother Sheila are currently estranged, due to the 90 year-old not getting on with David Furnish, who she'd "like to punch on the bloody earhole". She attended their civil partnership but not their marriage in 2014

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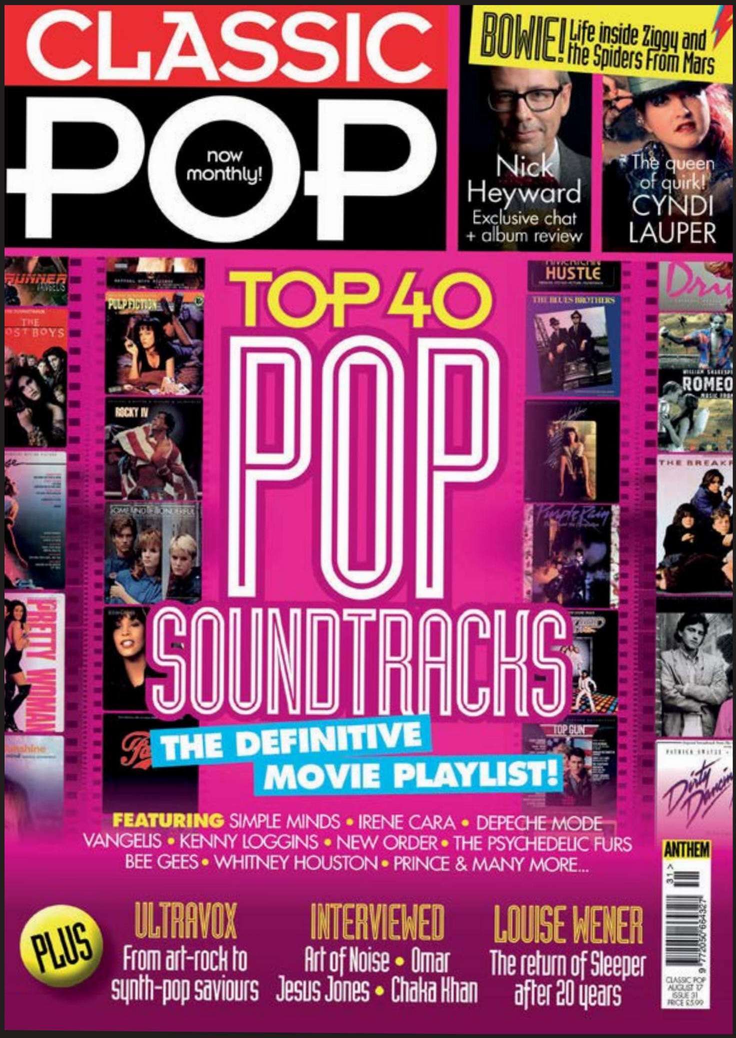

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TOP 40 ESSENTIAL ELTON SONGS

WE'VE CAREFULLY SORTED THROUGH THE PIANO MAN'S INCREDIBLE OUTPUT TO SELECT JUST 40 SONGS RANGING FROM 1970 TO 2016 THAT WE SIMPLY COULDN'T LIVE WITHOUT…

IAN WADE

Where to start with a Top 40 of Elton John? No less than 30 studio albums, four live albums, seven soundtracks, 133 official singles, another 17 where he's a key turn, plus countless other appearances. You could easily construct an entirely different list, and you'd still get the essence of Elton.

He's one of the most successful artists of all time, nudging only Elvis for the most US Top 40 entries, and second only to The Beatles on combined album sales. This is a man who sold 33 million copies of one single, which is also the biggest-selling since charts began. A man who is fanatical about his own chart facts and stats – and, looking back over some 350 million album sales and 100 million singles and downloads, there really is nothing for him to be ashamed of here.

We've picked out 40 – some obvious, and a few not so – tracks from his 50-year career, touched upon his early Seventies superstar phase, sifted through his wonky Eighties, sober Nineties and beyond. It's impossible to delve much into hidden gems, when the man has had hits with everything he's released (okay, maybe not *Leather Jackets*, but still).

We've kept it strictly Elton, although collaborations with Bright Light Bright Light (*Running Back To You*), John Lennon (*I Saw Her Standing There*), Dionne Warwick & Friends (*That's What Friends Are For*), Leon Russell (*Hey Ahab*), A Tribe Called Quest (*Solid Wall Of Sound*) and Queen (*The Show Must Go On*) were all on the long list. Literally every name you can think of, be it The Beach Boys, Cher, Marc Bolan, Lulu, Cliff Richard or Eric Clapton right through to Scissor Sisters, Lady Gaga, Kanye West, Gary Barlow, Queens of the Stone Age and The Killers has had Elton pop up as a vocalist, co-writer or simply tinkling the piano. His keen eye for a star has been reflected in those he's championed over the years. Ever the fan, he even contacts artists out of the blue to tell them he loves their music.

His fingerprints are all over pop and its DNA, and it's likely that right now there's an Elton John and Bernie Taupin song playing. You'll encounter *Rocket Man* in a cab, Ken Bruce might have dug up *Sartorial Eloquence* this morning, you may have had a run to *Are You Ready For Love*, or reached for *Song For Guy* to have a bit of a cry to. There's an Elton song for everything. God love him. And there's no sign of him stopping just yet.

SIDE 1
TUMBLEWEED CONNECTION
ELTON JOHN
STEREO
DJX.501
DJX.501A
(E. John/B. Taupin)
DICK JAMES MUSIC LIMITED

40

BORDER SONG

RECORD LABEL **DJM**
RELEASED **1970**

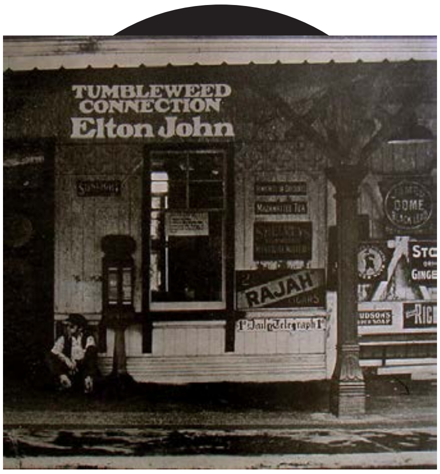
While the general consensus was that *Your Song* was the big breakthrough, the first appearance on a chart anywhere in the world for an Elton John single was actually in Canada, where this song ended up at No. 34 in the spring of 1970. Tackling themes of tolerance and bigotry, the lyrics were inspired by how alienating London felt to Taupin at the time. With its religious overtones and "Holy Moses" refrain, it was covered by Aretha Franklin; it was the final track of her 1972 album *Young Gifted And Black*.

39

YOUR SONG

RECORD LABEL **DJM**
RELEASED **1970**

The breakthrough hit, going Top 10 on both sides of the Atlantic, *Your Song* had been billed as B-side to *Take Me To The Pilot* before being flipped after DJs preferred it. It was written by Taupin on the roof of 20 Denmark Street where Elton was working as an office boy. It has barely left Elton's setlist since, and has been covered by Rod Stewart, Cilla Black and Ellie Goulding, as well as Ewan McGregor, who bellowed it in the hit film *Moulin Rouge!* in 2001. As of March 2017, it had sold 400,000 copies on downloads alone.



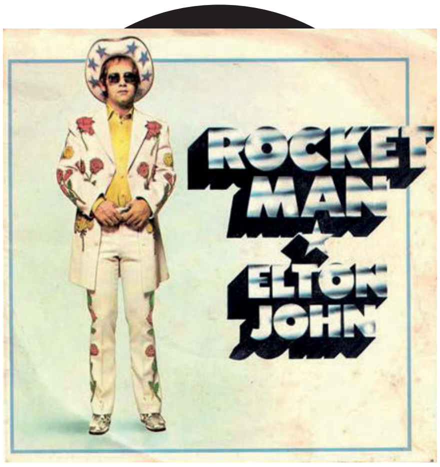
38

BURN DOWN THE MISSION

RECORD LABEL **DJM**
RELEASED **1971**

Originally released as a track on *Tumbleweed Connection*, the live version on *17-11-70* with a medley of Arthur Crudup's *My Baby Left Me* and The Beatles' *Get Back* is where the full magnificence of the song is realised. Almost an entire multi-styled musical crammed into one song, it's basically prog. The unusual chord changes and structure was influenced by Laura Nyro, and a young(ish) Jim Steinman was certainly taking notes, eventually getting Elton's guitarist Davey Johnstone to work with him a few years later.

Bowie and Elton may have appeared to hiss queenily at each other over their careers, but Elton alluded to *Space Oddity* at a show in LA a few days after Bowie's death



37

ROCKET MAN

RECORD LABEL **DJM**
RELEASED **1972**

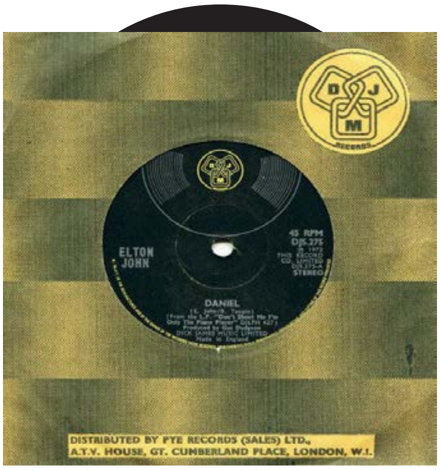
Taupin's lyric about a Mars-bound astronaut has similarities with another *Rocket Man* by US folk act Pearls Before Swine. Taupin admitted it had been an inspiration, although their song was inspired by the Ray Bradbury story *The Rocket Man*. There was also a slight resemblance to Bowie's *Space Oddity*. Bowie and Elton may have appeared to hiss queenily at each other over much of their careers, but Elton alluded instrumentally to *Space Oddity* at a show in LA a few days after Bowie's death.

36

CROCODILE ROCK

RECORD LABEL **DJM**
RELEASED **1972**

The lead single from *Don't Shoot Me I'm Only The Piano Player*, *Crocodile Rock* became Elton's first US No. 1. Elton credits the song, meant as a one-off homage to Speedy Gonzales and rock'n'roll in general, as the one which changed the critics' opinion of him. "I'd never started off as a hit writer, and it's evidenced on my first four albums. *Rolling Stone* gave it two stars, and I said, 'Oh, f*** off'. It was a great pop record. Shut the f*** up." He revisited it with Nelly Furtado for the *Gnomeo & Juliet* soundtrack in 2011.



> *Tiny Dancer* wasn't actually released as a single in the UK at the time. However, through the modern way of downloads it has since gone on to be one of Elton's most famous songs

35
TINY DANCER
RECORD LABEL **UNI (US)**
RELEASED **1972**

Tiny Dancer wasn't actually released as a single in the UK at the time. However, through the modern way of downloads, it has now sold 200,000 "copies", and has gone on to be one of Elton's most famous songs. It starred in Cameron Crowe's *Almost Famous*, it was a top three hit in the UK in 2009 when DJ Ironik and Chipmunk created a remix, it was used by Trump at his election rallies, to Elton's disgust, and was recently honoured at Cannes with a video premiere to celebrate Elton's 50 years of songwriting.

34
DANIEL
RECORD LABEL **DJM**
RELEASED **1973**

The follow-up to *Crocodile Rock* reached the top five on both sides of the Atlantic, and won Elton and Bernie the 1973 Ivor Novello award for Best Song Musically and Lyrically. "*Daniel* had been the most misinterpreted song that we'd ever written," claimed Taupin in the *Two Rooms* tribute project. "It was about a guy that went back to a small town in Texas after the Vietnam War. They lauded him and treated him like a hero, but he just wanted to go home, go back to the farm, and try to get back to the life that he'd led before."

33
SATURDAY NIGHT'S ALRIGHT FOR FIGHTING
RECORD LABEL **DJM**
RELEASED **1973**

An attempt to write a British take on an American rock'n'roll song – Elton just needed to add 'Preferably In A Pub Car Park at Closing' to get the full British drinking experience. Fitting in nicely with the bricklayers-in-eyeliner end of the glam scene, it was the only track to survive from the Jamaica sessions when Elton began to record *Goodbye Yellow Brick Road*. A No. 7 UK hit, it's been covered by all shades of rockers from Queen down to Nickelback.

32
GOODBYE YELLOW BRICK ROAD
RECORD LABEL **DJM**
RELEASED **1973**

For many, the quintessential Elton song; it's hard to escape the album that changed everything and sold 30 million worldwide! Elton was well into an imperial phase at this point, and could do no wrong. Based on *The Wizard Of Oz*, the legendary film about a young lady who goes in search of something better only to realise it's right there at home, it tells of a person yearning to return to simpler things and realising the high life isn't for them.

31
STEP INTO CHRISTMAS
RECORD LABEL **DJM**
RELEASED **1973**

There's a strong case to be made for how the *Now – The Christmas Album*, released in 1985, revolutionised the UK festive experience. For the first time, an album collected together all the biggies – Wham!, Bing, Shaky, Slade, Wizzard etc – into a sampler that set the blueprint for how festive pop is viewed today. *Step Into Christmas* had been a thank-you to Elton's fans for an amazing 1973, but only made No. 24. Thanks to *Now…* (and to downloads), the song has an annual chart outing each December.

30

CANDLE IN THE WIND

RECORD LABEL **DJM**
RELEASED **1974**

Goodbye Yellow Brick Road's *Candle In The Wind* has the distinction of being a hit in three versions: once when released in 1974, a second live version in Australia in 1987, and the re-worded tribute to Princess Diana in 1997, produced by George Martin and released as a double-A with *Something About The Way You Look Tonight.* A strange, sad moment in history, it sold over 33 million – at one point, six copies per second. Having sung it at her funeral, Elton never performed the rewritten version again.

29

BENNIE AND THE JETS

RECORD LABEL **DJM**
RELEASED **1974**

Bernie Taupin suggested that his lyrics about a fictional band were a satire on the excess that he and Elton had witnessed first-hand en route to megastardom. Elton wasn't too wild about it, but producer Gus Dudgeon decided to give it a "live" feel by adding applause from past concerts, and turned an 'odd' song into a highlight of *GYBR*. The song's afterlife has seen Elton covering it with Christina Aguilera, Lady Gaga and the Muppets, and it's also formed the basis of Frank Ocean's *Super Rich Kids.*

28

DON'T LET THE SUN GO DOWN ON ME

RECORD LABEL **DJM**
RELEASED **1974**

Originally released as a single from his album *Caribou, Don't Let…* became a No. 2 hit in the US and went to No. 6 in the UK. The version Elton recorded with George Michael – they'd performed it together at Live Aid – was taken from a surprise Elton appearance at Wembley on George's 1991 Cover To Cover tour. Reaching No. 1 on both sides of the Atlantic, with the proceeds going to AIDS and children's charities, it earned the pair a Grammy nomination.

27

THE BITCH IS BACK

RECORD LABEL **DJM**
RELEASED **1974**

Inspired by Taupin's wife Maxine Feibelman, who would mutter "the bitch is back" whenever Elton was in a foul mood, it parodied his extravagant lifestyle and reputation. Some radio stations objected to the word "bitch", but it was still a No. 4 hit on the Billboard. It's gone on to almost become Elton's theme song, and a staple of his live sets. Tina Turner recorded it twice, receiving a Grammy nomination on her second go, and the original features Dusty Springfield on backing vocals, too.

Inspired by the phrase Taupin's wife Maxine would mutter whenever Elton was in a foul mood, *The Bitch Is Back* parodied his extravagant lifestyle and reputation

26

PHILADELPHIA FREEDOM

RECORD LABEL **DJM**
RELEASED **1975**

Specifically written to be a one-off single during the *Captain Fantastic* sessions, the song was to honour tennis legend and then world #1 Billie Jean King and her team the Philadelphia Freedoms. Elton and King met at a party in 1973, and Elton said that he wanted to write a song for her, but Billie Jean didn't want it to be about tennis, which left Taupin rather relieved. With orchestral arrangement by Gene Page, who'd work mostly with Barry White, it spent a fortnight at the top of the chart that April.

Someone Saved My Life Tonight is a heartfelt thank-you to his good friend Long John Baldry, who halted Elton from committing suicide from the worry of getting married

25

SOMEONE SAVED MY LIFE TONIGHT

RECORD LABEL **DJM**
RELEASED **1975**

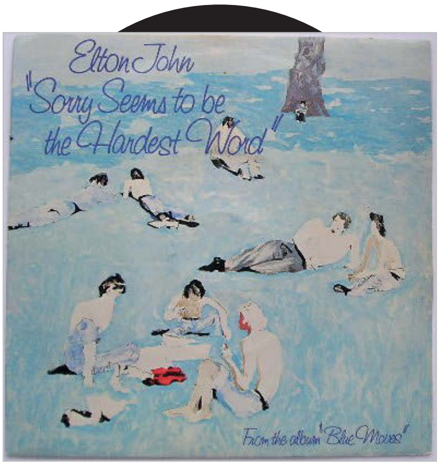
The only single from Elton's *Captain Fantastic* LP, the seven-minute *Someone Saved My Life Tonight* is a heartfelt thank-you to his friend the blues singer Long John Baldry (aka Sugar Bear), who'd reached No. 1 himself in 1967 with *Let The Heartaches Begin*. Baldry literally halted Elton from committing suicide from the worry of getting married to his fiancée Linda Woodrow. Fortunately, Elton conceded, and got a career and this minor masterpiece out of the ordeal.

24

DON'T GO BREAKING MY HEART

RECORD LABEL **ROCKET**
RELEASED **1976**

Elton's first UK No. 1, albeit in a duet with Kiki Dee, was an affectionate nod to the Motown duets of Marvin Gaye and Tammi Terrell/ Kim Weston. Written under the pseudonyms Ann Orson and Carte Blanche, Elton and Bernie had originally wanted Dusty Springfield to record it, but she was ill at the time. Elton took it to the Top 10 again with a version recorded with RuPaul in 1994, following up – spookily – with *True Love*, another team-up with Kiki, from 1993's *Duets*.



23

SORRY SEEMS TO BE THE HARDEST WORD

RECORD LABEL **ROCKET**
RELEASED **1976**

From the *Blue Moves* album, *Sorry Seems To Be*… taps into the psychology and philosophy of forgiveness with a beautiful song about a couple gradually breaking up, when both parties are too proud to actually say the "S" word. A million-seller in the US, it missed the UK Top 10, but in 2002 was covered by cut-price boyband Blue in collaboration with Elton, reaching No. 1. Surely, he'll get around to having No. 1s with everything, eventually.

22

SONG FOR GUY

RECORD LABEL **ROCKET**
RELEASED **1978**

Elton and Bernie hadn't split up, really – they'd just been doing all of the drugs and had started working with other people. One way to get around this Taupin-free period was to release an instrumental. Written and recorded on the same day during a morbid phase where Elton imagined his own death, it was title-free until he heard about the death of a young messenger, Guy Burchett, who worked for Rocket, and named the song after him. Those who thought it was about a gorilla, stay behind after class.

21

ARE YOU READY FOR LOVE

RECORD LABEL **ROCKET**
RELEASED **1979**

Written by Leroy Bell, Thom Bell and Casey James, and originally recorded and produced in 1977 in Philadelphia by Bell, who'd been responsible for hits for The Delfonics, The Stylistics and The Spinners (who recorded their own version). The recordings from this period were collected on the *Thom Bell Sessions* EP, released in 1989. *Are You Ready*... got its moment in 2003, when Ashley Beedle remixed it, and thanks to use on a Sky sports campaign it became Elton's fifth No. 1 in the UK.

20

LITTLE JEANNIE
RECORD LABEL **ROCKET**
RELEASED **1980**

In the Seventies and Eighties it was reasonably impossible to escape an Elton John song on the radio. Alongside all the massively well-known affairs, certain singles such as the now quite problematic *Island Girl, Victim's Part Time Love* and *Little Jeannie* felt bigger hits than they were due to Elton's gift at getting airplay, having written some of the top 100 most-played songs of all time. From *21 at 33*, this one sold a million in the US, and was his first big hit there in five years, but it went no further than No. 33 in the UK.

"What did John Lennon see in me? I think outrageousness and being true to myself. We hit it off straight away even though I was in complete awe of him"

19

ELTON'S SONG
RECORD LABEL **ROCKET**
RELEASED **1981**

Co-written with *Glad To Be Gay* hitmaker Tom Robinson, *Elton's Song* featured on *The Fox* album in 1981. "It was the first gay song that I actually recorded as a homosexual song," Elton told Cameron Crowe. "Rather than *All The Girls Love Alice*, it was the first boy-on-boy song I wrote – because Tom, of course, is a gay man, and we became great friends." The song about a schoolboy's crush came with a controversial – to the point of never being screened – video, directed by Russell Mulcahy. Elton declined to be in the promo.

18

EMPTY GARDEN (HEY HEY JOHNNY)
RECORD LABEL **ROCKET**
RELEASED **1982**

Elton had shied away from recording a tribute to John Lennon in case it looked a bit clumsy. They had been firm buddies; Elton was Sean Lennon's godfather. "What did John Lennon see in me? I think outrageousness and being true to myself. We hit it off straight away, even though I was in complete awe of him." *Empty Garden* referred to Lennon's final show at Madison Square Garden with Elton in 1974. The pair's live duet of *I Saw Her Standing There* reached No. 40.

17

BLUE EYES
RECORD LABEL **ROCKET**
RELEASED **1982**

Nominated for a Grammy in 1983, *Blue Eyes* returned Elton to the Top 10 in 1982 after an absence of five years, even if the accompanying album *Jump Up!* didn't. It was co-written with Gary Osborne, who came to Elton's attention when he wrote *Amoureuse* for Kiki Dee. A singer, jingle composer and principal writer on Jeff Wayne's *War Of The Worlds*, Osborne now chairs the Songwriters Executive of the British Academy Of Songwriters Composers and Authors and is chairman of the Ivor Novello Awards.

16

I GUESS THAT'S WHY THEY CALL IT THE BLUES
RECORD LABEL **ROCKET**
RELEASED **1983**

It was probably for the best that Bernie insisted on writing all the lyrics on 1983's *Too Low For Zero*. It was the first full Taupin/John album after a gap of seven years, and with the old gang and band back together, this single restored Elton back at, if not the top, at least within spitting distance, during a decade which would feature more downs than ups (careerwise, at least). Worth mentioning: the standout version with Mary J Blige on 2000's *One Night Only*.

15

I'M STILL STANDING
RECORD LABEL **ROCKET**
RELEASED **1983**

The iconic video, shot in Cannes, again by Russell Mulcahy, featured Elton capering about with a host of semi-clad types, all choreographed by renowned dancer Bruno Tonioli (now a judge on *Strictly Come Dancing*). Mulcahy lost a day's worth of film after falling into the sea with a camera, and the schedule was not helped by a mischievous Duran Duran turning up and taking Elton out for a Martini. "So I did," John later recalled; "I had six." At the time, it was hailed as one of the most expensive videos yet made.

14

SAD SONGS (SAY SO MUCH)
RECORD LABEL **ROCKET**
RELEASED **1984**

It was a bit of a shock to see Elton without his glasses in Russell Mulcahy's *Sad Songs*… video. Even on the single sleeve, he looked a little strange without his trademark face furniture. Released in 1984 as the first single from his *Breaking Hearts* album, it went Top 10 in the US and UK, and has been a mainstay of his live set ever since. He's performed it with Bryan Adams for his *One Night Only* live album, and sang it with Rod Stewart at the London Palladium when he was awarded the Brits Icon award in 2013.

13

NIKITA
RECORD LABEL **ROCKET**
RELEASED **1985**

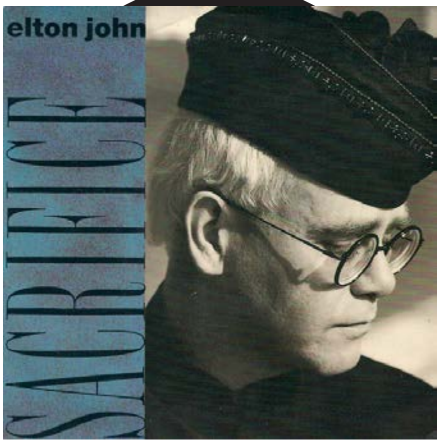
Songs about the Cold War were quite the thing in the Eighties. There was Frankie's *Two Tribes*, Sting had brooded about Russians, Billy Joel had *Leningrad*, Queen had *Hammer To Fall*… but Elton approached the tensions by fancying a border guard, and becoming a bit frustrated that he couldn't get into the country to meet her properly. The actor in Ken Russell's promo, Anya Major, went on to release a single, *Moscow Nights*, with none other than George Michael and Nik Kershaw on backing vocals.

> Songs about the Cold War were quite the thing in the Eighties, and Elton approached the tensions by singing about fancying a border guard

12

I DON'T WANNA GO ON WITH YOU LIKE THAT
RECORD LABEL **ROCKET**
RELEASED **1988**

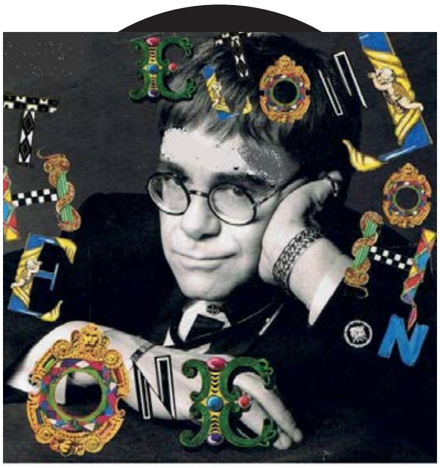
A highlight from Elton's self-proclaimed 'comeback' album, *Reg Strikes Back*, this became his biggest hit of the Eighties in the US, reaching No. 2 and kept off the top by pal George Michael's *Monkey*, but a measly No. 30 in the UK. The song's monogamy-free subject matter was perhaps a bit, erm, ahead of its time. It also benefitted from a Shep Pettibone remix that ups the tempo and adds orchestral stabs and cowbells aplenty.



11

SACRIFICE
RECORD LABEL **ROCKET**
RELEASED **1989**

When Elton appeared on *Wogan* to promote *Sleeping With The Past*, Terry asked if it had annoyed Elton that he hadn't had a solo No. 1 single. "No, not really. Laurel & Hardy had one, Richard Harris, even Arthur Mullard has had one… it would have been nice, but it doesn't bother me. I don't suppose I will ever have one now." Described by Elton as "a Percy Sledge song", *Sacrifice* performed poorly on release, then in early 1990 was picked up by DJs, reissued, and spent five weeks at No. 1 that June.

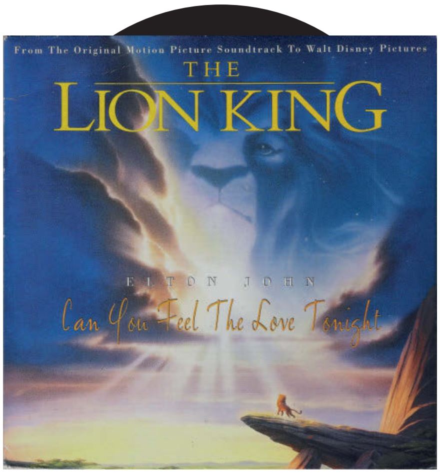


10

THE ONE

RECORD LABEL **ROCKET**
RELEASED **1992**

The title track of his first "sober" album, Taupin's lyrics for *The One* appealed to Elton, and connected with him, having overcome various addictions and his bulimia, and following up his most successful album in years with new hair, as well as meeting David Furnish. Another Grammy-nominated song, and US/UK Top 10 – when released as a CD single with *Your Song, Don't Let The Sun Go Down…* and *Sacrifice* as bonus tracks, it sat seamlessly among them, proving Elton didn't need to be off his face to make hits.

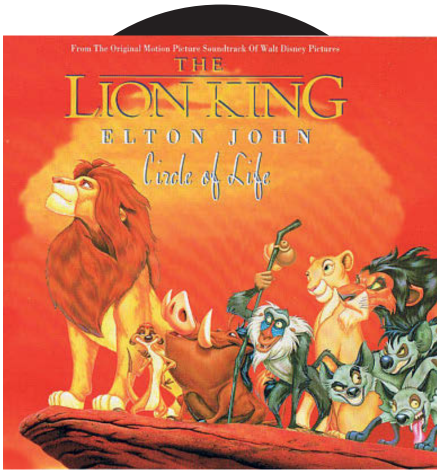


9

CAN YOU FEEL THE LOVE TONIGHT

RECORD LABEL **MERCURY**
RELEASED **1994**

Written for Disney's hit film *The Lion King*, Elton and co-writer Tim Rice wanted *Can You Feel The Love…* to be part of the long line of classic Disney love songs, and so it featured both during the film and in Elton's performance at the end. Among the backing vocalists are Gary Barlow, Rick Astley and – bizarrely – Robert Englund, aka *Nightmare On Elm Street*'s Freddy Krueger. It won an Academy Award, a Golden Globe, and a Grammy for Best Male Pop Vocal.



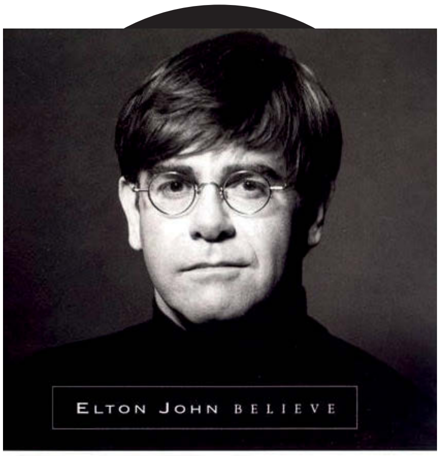
8

CIRCLE OF LIFE

RECORD LABEL **MERCURY**
RELEASED **1994**

The opening number and other big hit from *The Lion King, Circle Of Life* was also in the running for the 1994 Oscar for Best Original Song – as was *Hakuna Matata*, making this the first time three songs from the same film made the shortlist. As Elton told *Rolling Stone*, "I don't often play the songs from [*The Lion King*] live, because they don't really fit in, but I do play *Circle Of Life* because it's a brilliant lyric. It's really the song that should have won the Oscar, but *Can You Feel the Love Tonight* did. I'm not complaining."

With its Lennon-esque delivery and grace, had it been released 20 years earlier Elton's 1995 single *Believe* would have been regarded as one of his all-time classic songs

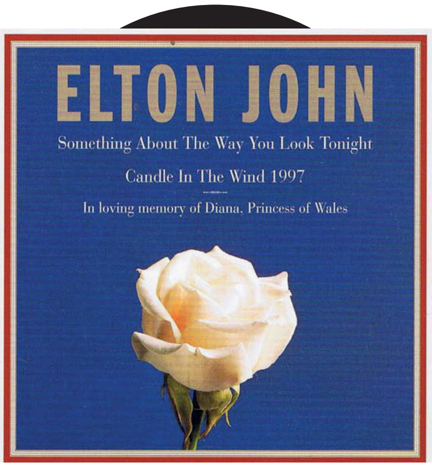


7

BELIEVE

RECORD LABEL **ROCKET**
RELEASED **1995**

The lead-off single from the *Made In England* album, *Believe* saw Elton nominated for yet another Grammy in 1996. It was also the source of much of the stress in *Tantrums & Tiaras*, where Elton had a narky moment while making the promo. We also see him monitoring the single's performance in his diary, noting that little could be done to help it in certain territories. With its Lennon-esque delivery and grace, had it been released 20 years earlier it would've been regarded as one of his all-time classics.

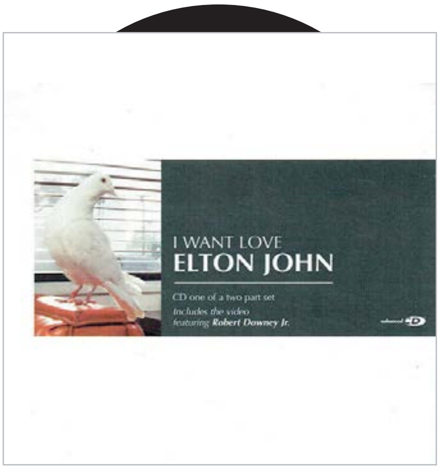


6

SOMETHING ABOUT THE WAY YOU LOOK TONIGHT

RECORD LABEL **MERCURY**
RELEASED **1997**

You know how it is. You're in the process of launching a new album with a single, and suddenly one of your best friends – the most famous woman in the world – is killed. After performing at Diana's funeral, Elton reissued *SATWYLT* again as a double-A side with *Candle In The Wind '97*, and the rest is Biggest Selling Single Ever history. One of Elton's finest love songs, it started picking up airplay in its own right, but it was sadly overshadowed by events.

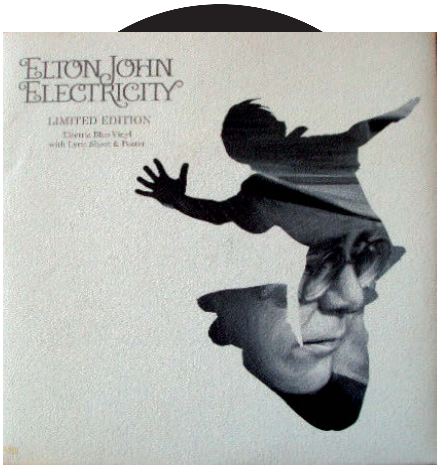


5

I WANT LOVE

RECORD LABEL **ROCKET/MERCURY**
RELEASED **2001**

I Want Love was Elton returning to his piano roots; mind you, was he ever very far away from them? It was a stand-out from 2001's *Songs From The West Coast*, and nominated for Grammys alongside the album and track *Original Sin*. Elton loved Ryan Adams' *Heartbreaker* album, and it ended up inspiring several songs on the record. Reaching No. 7 in the UK, *I Want Love*'s video was directed by Sam Taylor-Wood and featured Robert Downey Jr wandering around a Beverly Hills mansion, lip-synching to the song in one take.



4

ELECTRICITY

RECORD LABEL **MERCURY**
RELEASED **2005**

Having proven himself as a composer for both film and theatre, Elton, along with Lee Hall who wrote the lyrics and book, set about turning 2000's award-winning British film *Billy Elliot* into a musical. The story about a young boy attempting to become a dancer against a backdrop of the miners' strike was made for the stage, and became an instant hit when it debuted in the West End. A show-stopping number sung by Billy in the film when he auditions for the Royal Ballet School, Elton's version gave him a UK No. 6.

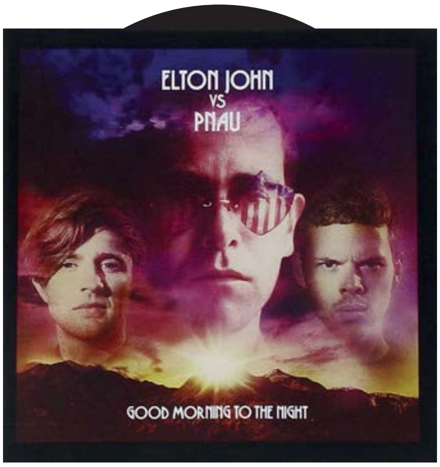
> After teaming up with dance duo Pnau, together they created all-new songs using bits from his back catalogue and brought Elton back onto the dancefloor again

3

THE BRIDGE

RECORD LABEL **MERCURY**
RELEASED **2006**

In 2006, Elton and Bernie decided they'd return to the theme of *Captain Fantastic…* with a sequel album, *The Captain & The Kid*. With Gus Dudgeon and the band pretty much as they were in 1975, Elton was well aware that he and Bernie had in fact become those two characters, with Bernie living on a ranch and Elton being all fabulous in general, and it detailed their lives in the 30 years that had passed. While not a single – none were released from the LP – *The Bridge* features one of Elton's finest vocals.

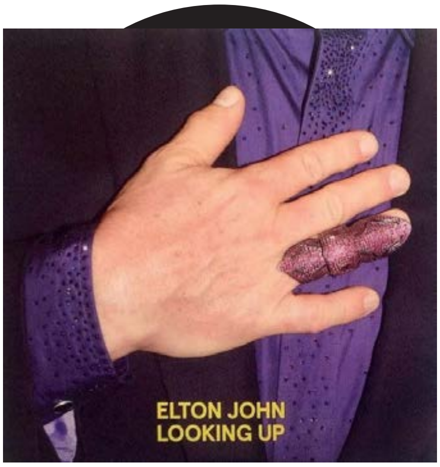


2

SAD

RECORD LABEL **UNIVERSAL**
RELEASED **2012**

Although not a stranger to having his songs reswizzled, the idea of an Elton remix album may have seemed like a bit of weird folly that he might have dallied with during the Eighties. However, after teaming up with Australian dance duo Pnau, whose career Elton had been mentoring, together they created all-new songs using bits from his back catalogue to create the rather ace *Good Morning To The Night*. It scored him his first UK No. 1 album in over a decade, and brought Elton back onto the dancefloor again.



1

LOOKING UP

RECORD LABEL **MERCURY/VIRGIN**
RELEASED **2016**

Elton's third album with T Bone Burnett, *Wonderful Crazy Night* saw him alongside his classic live band for the first time since 2006's *The Captain & The Kid*, and as in old times, it was recorded in just 17 days. Wanting to create a more upbeat work, all the songs were written as joyful affairs, as a counterpoint to *The Diving Board*. Released ahead of the album, the bluesin' *Looking Up* marked Elton's 71st showing on the Billboard's Adult Contemporary chart – a record – and a fine addition to a 50-year career.

WIN!

CLASSIC ELTON JOHN VINYL LPS

WIN 1 X VINYL LP BUNDLE FEATURING FOUR 180g REMASTERED ELTON REISSUES

Vinyl fans have reason to rejoice at the news that an abundance of Elton John's best-loved LPs are back on vinyl, to be reissued throughout the year. All of these stunning reissues have been remastered from the original master tapes by US Grammy-winning mastering guru Bob Ludwig and each special edition is issued on classy 180g heavyweight vinyl. The onslaught is already well underway with the first wave of releases including *Elton John, Madman Across The Water, Songs For The West Coast, Too Low For Zero, Tumbleweed Connection, Honky Château, Captain Fantastic and the Brown Dirt Cowboy,* Caribou and *Don't Shoot Me I'm Only The Piano Player,* all availabel now. Following that, come *Rock Of The Westies* and *The Big Picture,* followed by *Blue Moves, Empty Sky, One Night Only - The Greatest Hits* and *Sleeping With The Past,* that arrive just in time to light up the the darker months of the year.

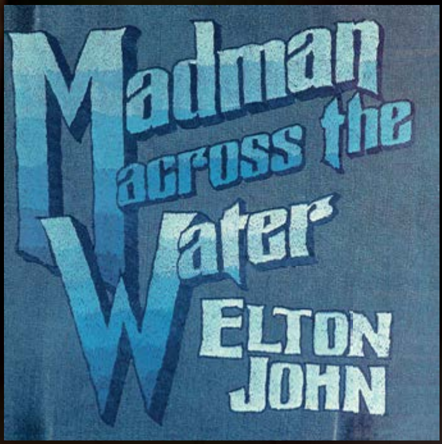
Virtually all of these timeless albums went top ten at the time of release and all of those that did were certified either platinum or multi-platinum – plus it's the very first time that *The Big Picture* and live album *One Night Only,* have been released on vinyl, both of which will be issued as double album sets.

Thanks to the kind folk at Universal Music, we have four of these delectable 180g treasures to give away in one superb vinyl bundle – *Elton John, Madman Across The Water, Songs From The West Coast* and *Too Low For Zero.* Simply answer the following question to be in with a shot…

Q Sir Elton John was raised in which area of London?:

A *Kensington*
B *Pinner*
C *Richmond*

"ALL OF THESE STUNNING SPECIAL 180G HEAVYWEIGHT VINYL REISSUES HAVE BEEN REMASTERED FROM THE ORGINAL MASTER TAPES BY US GRAMMY-WINNING GURU BOB LUDWIG"



TERMS & CONDITIONS

To be in with a chance of winning the prizes, simply email your answers to steve.harnell@anthem-publishing.com, or visit www.classicpopmag.com and click on 'competitions', click on the relevant question and fill in your answer and email. By entering your details, you will automatically be added to the *Classic Pop* magazine email newsletter mailing lists, keeping you informed of news, special offers and promotions via email. We never pass on customer email addresses to other companies. You may unsubscribe from these messages at any time. The prizes are not transferable, nor can they be redeemed for vouchers or money. No-one from Anthem Publishing or companies affiliated with any of the competitions is allowed to enter. Only one entrant per person.The judge's decision is final. Visit www.classicpopmag.com for more competitions not featured in the magazine and keep checking in on the website for more great prizes to win! The closing date for the competition on this page is **31 November 2017**

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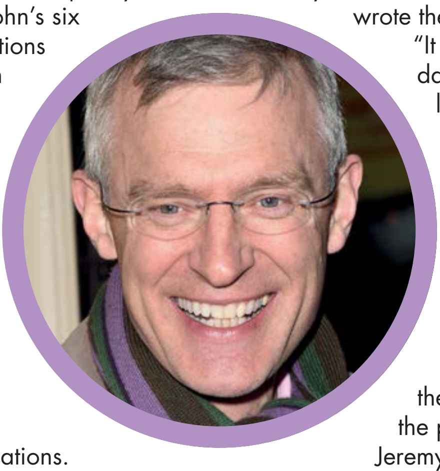
TWO'S COMPANY

THE COLLABORATIONS

HOW DO YOU CHOOSE THE BEST OF ELTON JOHN'S WORK WITH OTHERS? JUST HEAD OVER TO BBC RADIO 2 – ELTON'S SPIRITUAL HOME – AND CHAT TO THE LIKES OF JEREMY VINE, LIZ KERSHAW AND KEN BRUCE. THE RESULTS MIGHT SURPRISE YOU...

IAN PEEL

You could argue that Elton's entire career has been one long collaboration, from Bernie Taupin to Thom Bell to the many and varied aspects of his own persona, on-stage and off. Consequently, writing a feature on Elton John's six decades-worth of collaborations is not an easy task – though writing a book would be a piece of cake. Alongside being an iconic solo artist, he's never been afraid to collaborate, be it for fun, for a dare, to explore new musical genres or to simply help his songs find the perfect voice.



So rather than list them all here, we set out to get some high-level recommendations. Camping out in the lobby of BBC Radio 2 – the spiritual home of Elton's music in the UK – we collared presenters as they finished their shows and came off their shifts, and asked them one simple question. Which, for you, is the quintessential Elton John collaboration?

It didn't take Jeremy Vine long to come up with an answer. *Don't Go Breaking My Heart* – a No. 1 smash hit from the summer of 1976 – in which Elton memorably duets, cajoles and flirts with Kiki Dee across four and a half minutes of Motown pastiche. "This is one of the great duets," Jeremy declares, "improved beyond measure by the fact that Elton wrote the song and is singing it! "It reminds me of summer days as a child... I remember listening to it on Capital Radio in the Seventies and the DJ asked, 'Why isn't that our Eurovision Song Contest entry?' It has survived all these years, is still played every other day on Radio 2, and is unmistakable from the opening seconds on the piano."

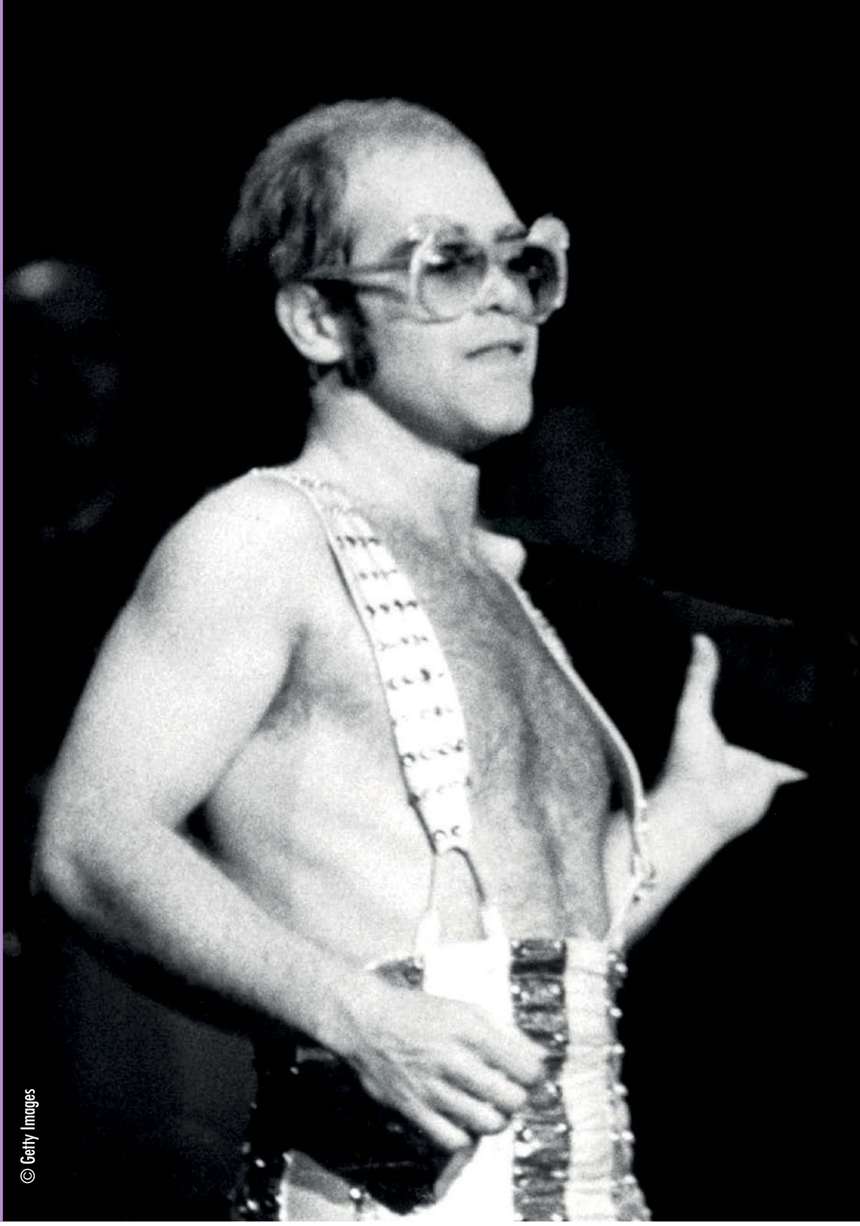
Jeremy is right: back in 1976 it was the soundtrack to the summer, reaching No. 1 and staying there for six weeks... possibly all the more surprising as it didn't have an album to back it up. Although recorded during sessions for *Blue Moves*, Elton's eleventh LP, it couldn't find a place amongst its more swaggering (*Boogie Pilgrim*), throwaway (*Theme From A Non-Existent TV Series*) and emotionally-charged (*Sorry*

Elton and Kiki Dee shimmy around for the cameras while making the video for 1976's *Don't Go Breaking My Heart*

Seems To Be The Hardest Word) works. *Don't Go Breaking My Heart* isn't just for the Radio 2 crowd though, as it pulls in fans of every ilk. "As kids, my sister and I used to wail this one out with hairbrushes for mics," BBC 6Music's early breakfast show host Chris Hawkins told us. "We loved it. The neighbours didn't. It was also the answer to one of the questions I got right on *Celebrity Mastermind,* so I'll love it for evermore."

Maybe it stuck in Chris' mind on *Celebrity Mastermind* partly for Elton and Kiki's rendition (though he and Bernie Taupin originally, allegedly, penned it for Dusty Springfield), but also for some of the great covers and revivals it's had over the years. In 1977 Miss Piggy stood in for Kiki when Elton appeared on *The Muppet Show*. In 1997, the Spice Girls took her place for *An Audience with... Elton John*. And in 1994, RuPaul filled Kiki's shoes on an updated version for the *Duets* album.

There has, however, been one inadvertent downside to the enduring success of this particular collaboration. "My only regret," Jeremy opines, "is that it has overshadowed a lot of Kiki Dee's other work. She must be sick of people asking her the story behind it when she sang so many other songs."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SQUARE JOHN

From one of the cheeriest, most upbeat collaborations in the Elton canon to the most emotionally-charged, which also plays soundtrack to a pivotal moment in pop history. "Amongst many collaborations, for me, the 1974 duet with John Lennon at Madison Square Garden on *Lucy In The Sky With Diamonds* was one of those moments when something really special was in the air," Radio 2's Ken Bruce decides. And it's impossible to argue.

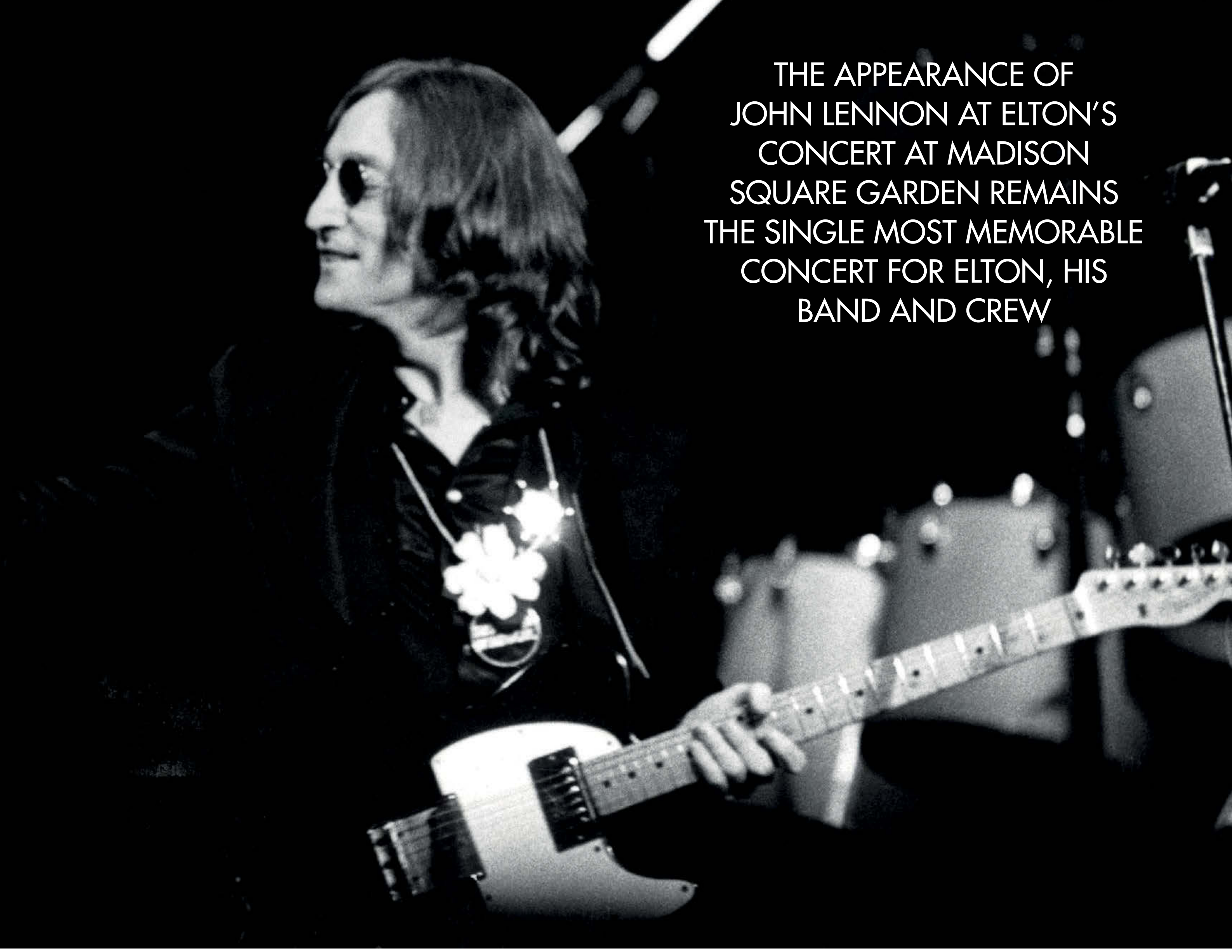
The story of this collaboration began when Elton popped into the Record Plant studio in New York City to catch up with John Lennon. Excommunicated from Yoko Ono at the time, the ex-Beatle was buried deeply in the making of his suitably-titled *Walls And Bridges* album, on which Elton promptly provided backing vocals on *Whatever Gets You Thru The Night* and piano on *Surprise, Surprise (Sweet Bird Of Paradox)*. As it turned out, Lennon was impressed by Elton's off-the-cuff contributions, describing his work on the session as from, "a fine musician, great piano player. I was really pleasantly surprised at the way he could get in on such a loose track and add to it and keep up with the rhythm changes. … We had a great time."

Elton, too, loved their work together and predicted that, if *Whatever Gets You Thru The Night* was to be released as a single, then it would be a No. 1. Going one step further, he bet Lennon that, if it did, he should join him on stage on his next tour, at Madison Square Garden. Lennon scoffed at the thought but readily assented. After all, he hadn't had a No. 1 single for almost five years, so he agreed to the bet despite the fact that he'd effectively retired from live shows, only playing a couple of major concerts since the end of the Sixties.

"He [Elton] sang on a single that turned out to be a cut from *Walls And Bridges, Whatever Gets You Thru The Night,*" Lennon said, giving his version of events for *The Playboy Interviews With John Lennon And Yoko Ono*, originally published in 1981 (and most recently revised and republished as 2000's *All We Are Saying: The Last Major Interview with John Lennon and Yoko Ono*). "He sang harmony on it and he really did a damn good job. So I sort of half-heartedly promised that if *Whatever Gets You Thru The Night* became No. 1, which I had no reason to expect, I'd do Madison Square Garden with him."

To everyone's surprise, *Walls And Bridges* was a hit and *Whatever Gets You Thru The Night* did indeed reach No. 1 as a single (his 'boogie pop' replacing the most Seventies of rock tracks, Bachman-Turner Overdrive's *You Ain't Seen Nothing Yet*). "So one day Elton called and said, 'Remember when you promised…'"

As Elton's official website summarised, marking the collaboration's 40th anniversary, "The appearance of John Lennon at Elton's concert on



THE APPEARANCE OF JOHN LENNON AT ELTON'S CONCERT AT MADISON SQUARE GARDEN REMAINS THE SINGLE MOST MEMORABLE CONCERT FOR ELTON, HIS BAND AND CREW

November 28, 1974 (Thanksgiving night) at Madison Square Garden in New York City remains the single most memorable concert for Elton, his band and crew… and virtually everyone else who was there."

It was also the night that John reconciled with Yoko Ono, reuniting after their separation during his infamous 18-month 'lost weekend' and began a completely new – and what would turn out to be penultimate – chapter of his life, the 'house husband years'. "I couldn't have gone on if I'd known she was in the audience," Lennon told *Playboy* "It was hard enough. [But] I went on because I had promised Elton I'd do it."

And he really did do it. Lennon's last ever public concert comprised three tracks in collaboration with Elton John: *Whatever Gets You Thru The Night*, Ken Bruce's favourite, *Lucy In The Sky With Diamonds* (already in Elton's set for that tour) and one last swansong.

"I'd like to thank Elton and the boys for having me on tonight," Lennon announced to the audience, having suffered from major stage fright just before he walked on. "We tried to think of a number to finish off with so I can get out of here and be sick, and we thought we'd do a number of an old, estranged fiancé of mine, called Paul. This is one I never sang, it's an old Beatle number, and we just about know it…" And with that they launched into *I Saw Her Standing There*.

Ken Bruce is spot on. There really was something very special in the air that night. And Elton couldn't help but look back on the occasion when he found himself on stage at Madison Square Garden once more, in October 2000 for a show that was later released on CD as *Elton John One Night Only – The Greatest Hits*.

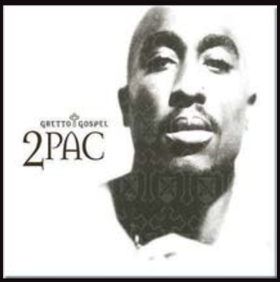
"One of the greatest moments of my life, not only just my musical life but my personal life," he told a hushed audience, "was in this very building in 1974. Someone came on stage and sang three songs with us. And I've never heard a reception in the whole of my life like it. It was 10 minutes of the most deafening roar. That person was very special, and of course you know I'm talking about John Lennon… Every time I

John Lennon with Elton John onstage for the ex-Beatle's final live appearance on 28 November, 1974 at Madison Square Garden

RISKY MOVES

ELTON'S WILD SIDE

We've focused on a handful of Elton's most moving, most historic collaborations in this feature, but there are literally dozens of other examples in his catalogue to explore. In the Eighties he worked alongside some true legends, not least the on 1985 single *That's What Friends Are For,* recorded with Dionne Warwick, Gladys Knight and Stevie Wonder – and in 1989 there was *Through The Storm* with Aretha Franklin. He also narrowly missed the Top 40 in 1986 with *Slow Rivers* in collaboration with Cliff Richard.



There were relatively few collaborations in the Nineties, but one of them, *Perfect Day*, was a massive No. 1 hit in the UK and went double platinum. This was the BBC's Children In Need single, of course, which featured a stellar cast and vocals from Elton alongside Bono, David Bowie and Laurie Anderson.

Unlike most artists, who venture more towards the middle of the road with age, the opposite is true with Elton John. He's become almost rebellious towards MOR, and the Nineties and Noughties have seen a most daring set of collaborations, into genres (and with artists) he loves, which have kept his fans surprised and his critics guessing.

In 2005 he featured on *Ghetto Gospel*, 2Pac's UK No. 1 single. And, at the end of the Noughties, there was another rap collab when the chorus from *Tiny Dancer* underpinned *Tiny Dancer* (*Hold Me Closer)* by Ironik and Chipmunk. While that single reached No. 3 in the UK, another urban feature – the brilliant *Hard Times* by Plan B (featuring vocals from Elton and Paloma Faith and released in aid of the 2011 Pakistan floods and 2011 Tohoku earthquake and tsunami) only managed No. 147.

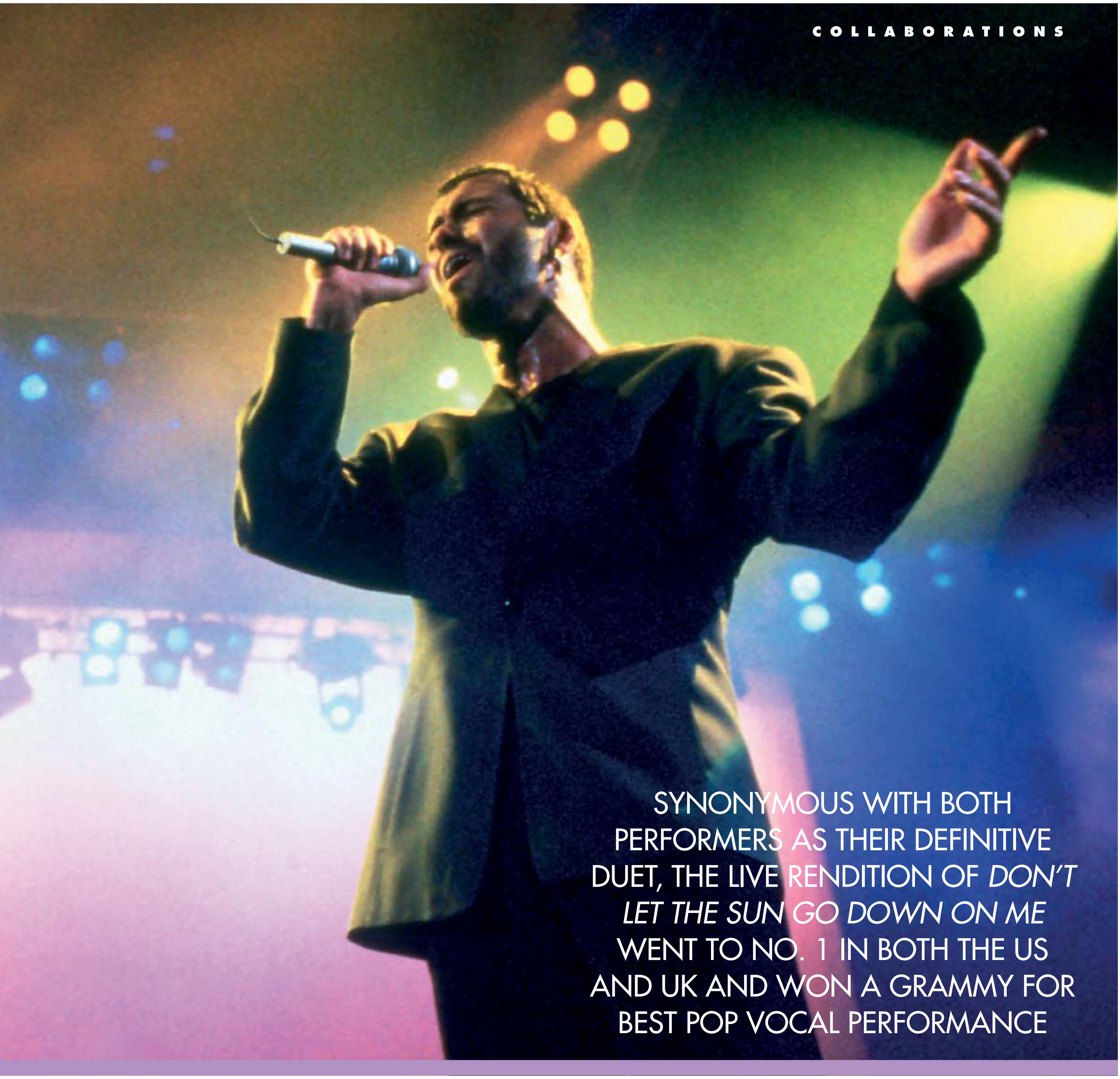
© Getty Images

play this building I think of him, and how much I miss him and how much he enriched all our lives."

The triumvirate of *Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds*, *Whatever Gets You Thru The Night* and *I Saw Her Standing There* – no matter what their level of emotional charge – seem to have become somewhat forgotten in Elton's discography. They were released in 1981 as the *28 November 1974* EP, and also showed up on the first, eponymous *John Lennon* CD box set in 1990. In 1996, they became footnotes to the reissue of Elton's live album *Here And There*.

SUN RISING

There is, however, one duet that has done the opposite, looming ever-larger over the careers of both performers. That's Elton's duet with George Michael, *Don't Let The Sun Go Down On Me*. Although it's become synonymous with both performers as one of their definitive duets, *Don't Let The Sun Go Down On*



SYNONYMOUS WITH BOTH PERFORMERS AS THEIR DEFINITIVE DUET, THE LIVE RENDITION OF *DON'T LET THE SUN GO DOWN ON ME* WENT TO NO. 1 IN BOTH THE US AND UK AND WON A GRAMMY FOR BEST POP VOCAL PERFORMANCE

Me was originally released by Elton alone, back in 1974 for the *Caribou* album, and it reached No. 16 in the UK charts. It did even better in the US – perhaps spurred on by the celebrity backing vocals of The Beach Boys' Carl Wilson and Bruce Johnston – and got as far as No. 2 on the Billboard chart, pipped to the post by *Annie's Song* by John Denver.

The song became a firm favourite of George Michael and he chose it – as a solo, Elton just played piano – to sing at Live Aid in 1985. Then, in 1991, on the Cover To Cover tour, *Don't Let The Sun Go Down On Me* was in Michael's repertoire each night, and he brought Elton on stage as a surprise guest when the tour arrived at Wembley Arena in March. The performance brought the house down and it was clear it had to become a single release.

And what a single it was. The 1991 live duet rendition of *Don't Let The Sun Go Down On Me* went to No. 1 in both the US and the UK and won a Grammy Award for Best Pop Vocal Performance. Trawl through Spotify and you'll find a lot of covers of this song by everyone from Roger Daltrey to Gloria Estefan, Joe Cocker to Oleta Adams, but none pack the emotional charge of the George Michael duet, whether it's on a Wembley Stadium level or – for 6Music and Radio 2's Liz Kershaw – a very personal level.

The ultimate Elton duet? Here the singer performs onstage with George Michael in 1991

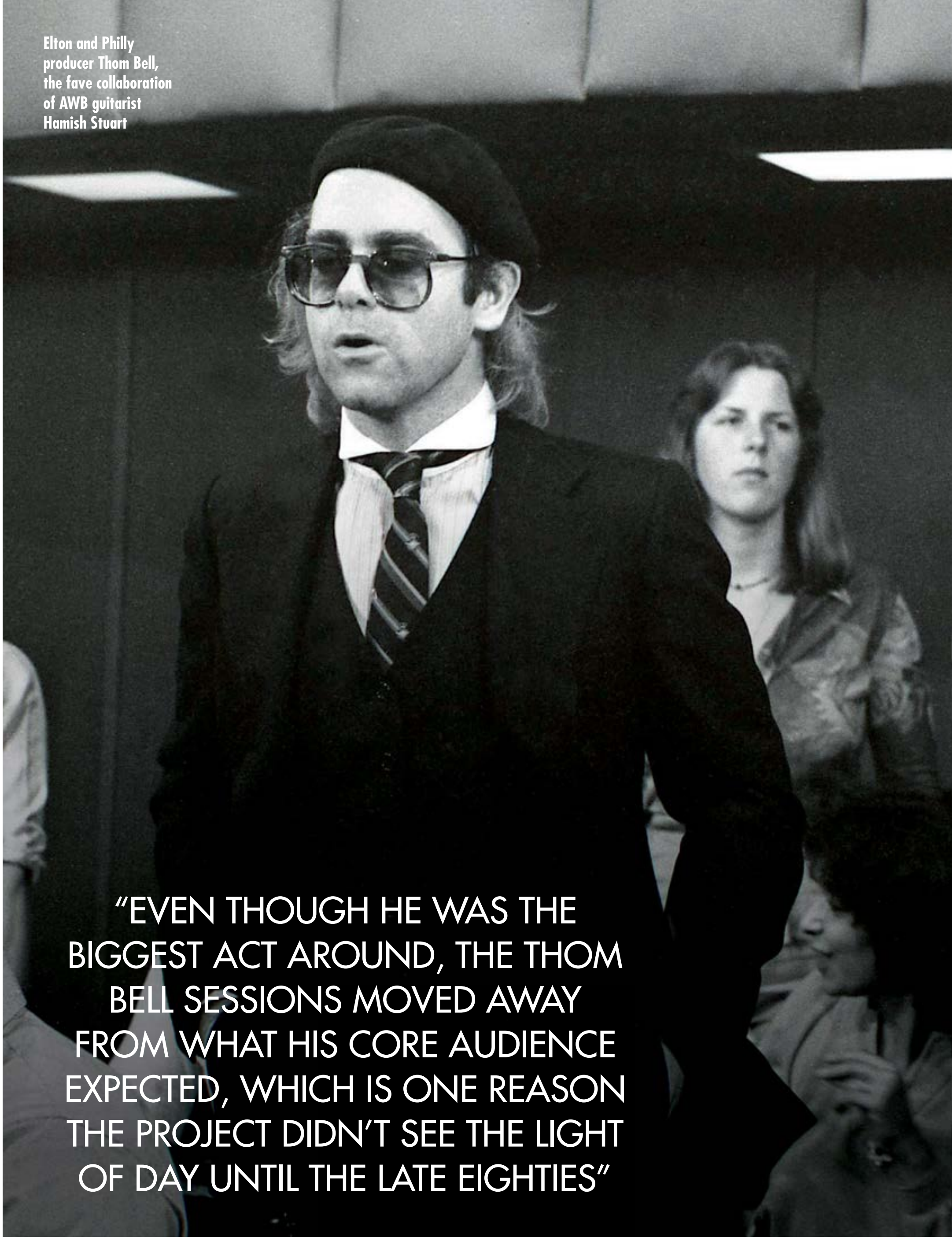
ELTON & PSB
SCANDALOUS

"For me it's the intertwined history with the Pet Shop Boys that fascinates me most about Elton John's career as a collaborative artist," says *Classic Pop* magazine's original founder and now Editor-at-large, Ian Peel.

At its nucleus is a session that Norwegian production team Stargate produced in 2003 which yielded two classic tracks. The first, *In Private*, was written by Neil and Chris for Dusty Springfield's soundtrack for the 1989 film *Scandal*. Rejected by the film-makers, it was nonetheless issued as a single and became a memorable part of Dusty's Nineties reinvention. Come 2003, when Neil and Chris were in the studio working on *Flamboyant* – a song inspired by Elton, actually – they collaborated to cut a new duet version of *In Private*.

The same recording session also gave rise to *Alone Again (Naturally)*. Originally penned by Irish singer-songwriter Gilbert O'Sullivan – it gave him a No. 1 Billboard hit in 1972 – Neil and Elton turned the song from a solo into a duet with lyrics. As the Pet Shop Boys' definitive biographer Wane Struder observes, the original is "so overwrought that it begs for either scorn or a camp interpretation (or both).

"But I don't detect a hint of either scorn or camp in this rendition," he adds. "The Boys and Elton play it straight, so to speak, leaving it totally up to us how to react. And any reaction would surely reveal more about the listener than it does about the songwriter and the performers."



Elton and Philly producer Thom Bell, the fave collaboration of AWB guitarist Hamish Stuart

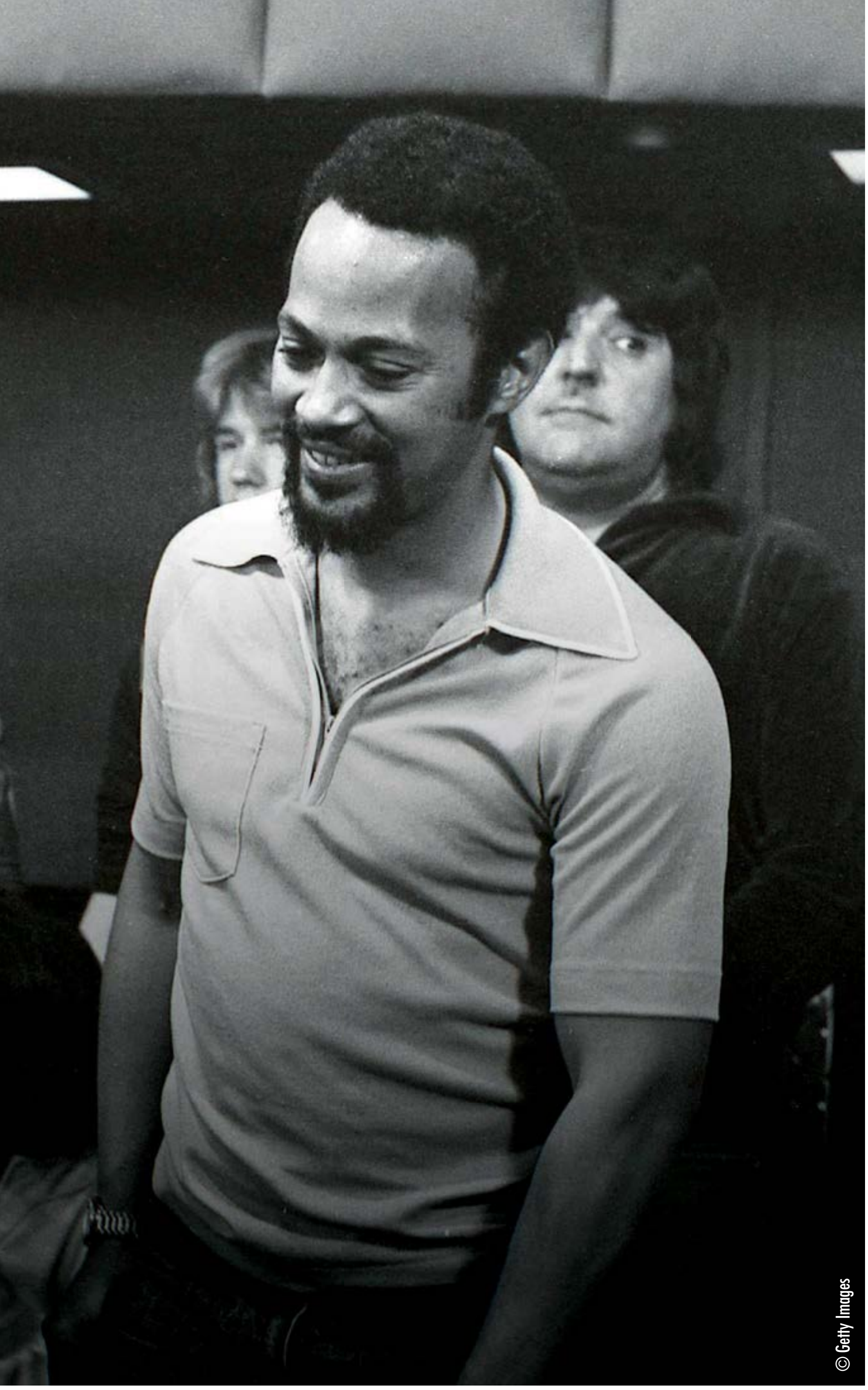
"EVEN THOUGH HE WAS THE BIGGEST ACT AROUND, THE THOM BELL SESSIONS MOVED AWAY FROM WHAT HIS CORE AUDIENCE EXPECTED, WHICH IS ONE REASON THE PROJECT DIDN'T SEE THE LIGHT OF DAY UNTIL THE LATE EIGHTIES"

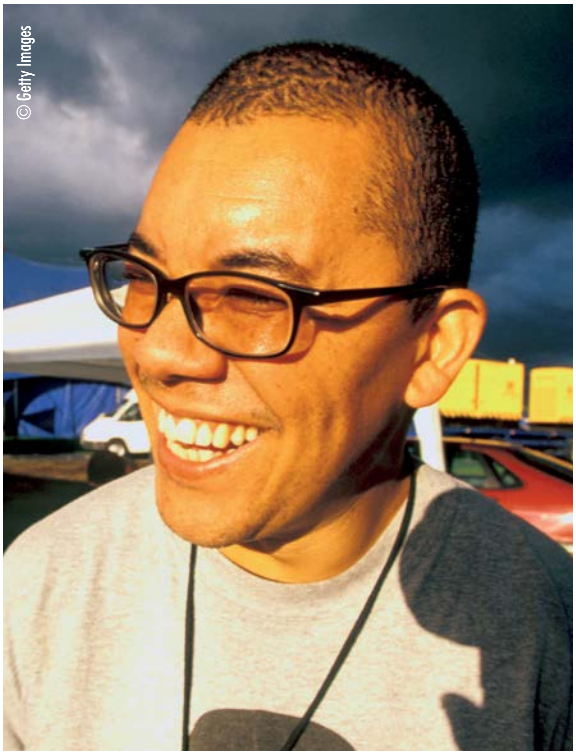
"Elton John's best collaborations were with lyricist Bernie Taupin," she says – and *Don't Let The Sun Go Down On Me*'s lyrics are classic Taupin. "I loved all his albums up to and including *Goodbye Yellow Brick Road*. But if I had to pick one song after those it would be *Don't Let The Sun Go Down On Me* with George Michael. It rips my heart out every time because it was playing when I got the push from Radio 1 and I thought my world had come to an end as I drove home in tears..."

SOUND AS A BELL

The funny thing about hanging out at Radio 2 is that you never know who you're doing to bump into. Just after our chat with Liz, I spot Hamish Stuart, erstwhile Nineties guitarist with Paul McCartney and founder member of the Average White Band.

Bringing everything full circle, the Average White Band were on the US scene around the same time that Elton and John Lennon were working together. "I only ever played with Elton once," Hamish told me, "when he joined us on stage at the Average White Band's breakthrough Troubadour gig in LA back in 1974.





He was around a lot and a big supporter of us in our early years."

And Hamish's favourites from Elton's canon of collaborations? "Obviously his most important collaboration was with Bernie!" Hamish laughs. "But I'm a great fan of Thom Bell and thought their work together was interesting and quite a bold move for Elton at the time."

If you look at our Long Live Vinyl feature on page 126 of this special issue, you'll find us highlighting the 2016 reissue of the EP that Elton recorded back in 1977 with Thom Bell, the Philly soul production maestro. At the time John was estranged from Bernie Taupin and actively looking for new ways of bringing his work to the marketplace. Alas, the sessions with Bell reportedly didn't go nearly as smoothly as Elton hoped, and after the team had laid down some songs at Bell's Seattle-based studio and added some overdubs back in Philadelphia, recording came to a shuddering halt after only six tracks had been completed. It's reported that artist and producer fell out further when it came to mixing and the songs weren't technically completed for another two years, but as the house music era dawned, the Elton/Bell material suddenly became very sought-after – and expensive.

DJ and producer Ashley Beedle remixed the EP's standout track, *Are You Ready For Love*, giving Elton another hit collaboration, and yet another No. 1 chart single, in 2003.

"Even though Elton was just about the biggest act around, *The Thom Bell Sessions* moved away from what his core audience expected," Hamish explains, "which, I guess, is one of the reasons the whole project didn't see the light of day till the late Eighties? Anyway, I do love *Are You Ready For Love*."

Top: DJ Ashley Beedle, remixer of *Are You Ready For Love*. Above: a still from Elton's video for the song in 2003

Being Elton

THOUGH ELTON ROSE TO FAME DURING THE GLAM ERA, BEFORE LONG HE HAD AMPED UP HIS IMAGE – AND HIS SHOWMANSHIP – TO INTERGALACTIC LEVELS… AND WE LOVE HIM FOR IT

IAN WADE

It had not been lost on Elton that being stuck behind a piano wasn't quite as exciting as being a lead guitarist – or a singer who could clamber down into the audience, lose their shirt, but come back onstage in time for the chorus. He had to make his presence known in other ways, and that's where the costumes came in: they were also used as a shield, to hide the real Elton. "With the costumes," he said to Alexis Petridis in the liner notes of *Goodbye Yellow Brick Road*'s 40th anniversary set, "I wasn't just living out my fantasies onstage, I was trying to *be* someone else."

Keen to make an impact right from the start, Elton's suits, platforms and eyewear were part and parcel of his shows from the turn of the Seventies. His look from this era is as iconic in rock history as Noddy Holder's top hat or the Aladdin Sane flash, becoming shorthand for glam in the process. Though Elton was perhaps not one for Bowie-style unisex leotards, he excelled in flamboyance and glamour in a way that was more akin to Hollywood than outer space, if anything. In 1973, he wore a white stage outfit that had a feather trim as well as rhinestone encrusted glasses. In May 1974, he dressed as a hornet when he performed an open-air concert at Watford. Many of these outfits were custom-made by British designer Annie Reavey, who had a running joke with Elton to see how zany they could make him look.

Bob Mackie, the legendary designer whose outfits have been worn by the likes of Cher, Diana Ross and Tina Turner, was responsible for much of Elton's more way-out stage gear in the Seventies and Eighties, as well as sketching the frock Marilyn Monroe wore when she wished the president a happy birthday. Mackie was the man behind classic garments such as the sequin-studded Dodgers uniform that Elton wore for his two sold-out shows in 1975 at the stadium, complete with 'Elton #1' emblazoned on the back. How much did it cost? "Two thousand, but that's just a ballpark figure," Elton quipped to *Time* magazine. $2000 was nothing much to Elton, who at that time had his own Boeing 720 airplane, fitted out with a fireplace and bedroom, which he christened Starship One. Further highlights from this era include dressing up as the Statue of Liberty for his show in Massachusetts in 1976, or the actual stars and stripes at another show during his Louder Than Concorde tour.

Mackie designed the duck suit that Elton wore for his Central Park concert in 1980 and which Elton unveiled after the first encore in front of 400,000 fans, although it turned out to be

Elton performing to more than 100,000 people at Dodger Stadium in Los Angeles, 1975, wearing a sequinned baseball outfit by Bob Mackie

© Getty Images

Above, a very much standing-up Elton unveils the famous duck outfit at New York City's Central Park, 1980

Above, a moment from the final performance of Elton's show The Red Piano at the Colosseum at Caesars Palace on April 22, 2009 in Las Vegas

one of the "longest costume changes in history", as Elton recalled being stuffed into the suit by his personal assistant Bob Halley. "I put my legs in the armholes and arms in the leg holes, and I'm saying to Bob, 'They're going to go.'"

"We fitted the costume on him, but he never sat down on a piano bench," Mackie said. "So it was really a very memorable concert moment. He walked out on stage and he can't sit down because he's got this whole tail sticking out and flippers made to look like duck feet. And he just got hysterical laughing."

For his Tour De Force jaunt in 1986, Elton teamed up with the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra to play 28 dates across Australia, the first of its kind for a rock star. Five months in planning and countless rehearsals involving 88 musicians, the show was in two parts. Elton and his band would knock out a dozen numbers before the orchestra joined them after the interval. Elton chose to differentiate each segment via Tina Turner-style frightwigs in the first half, and by dressing up as Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart in the second half, by wearing a pearl white suit, a powdered wig, and even going so far as to put a mole on his face.

"ELTON WALKED OUT AND HE CAN'T SIT DOWN BECAUSE HE'S GOT THIS WHOLE TAIL STICKING OUT AND FLIPPERS MADE TO LOOK LIKE DUCK FEET. AND HE JUST GOT HYSTERICAL LAUGHING"

SUITED AND BOOTED

By 1988, Elton had become a bit bored with amassing a wardrobe full of chicken suits and panda bear heads, and offloaded a ton of it for auction at Sotheby's, raising a great deal of money in the process. Post-rehab and post-auction, and in light of a new and clean Elton, the Nineties had little going for it, ostentatious costume-wise. He was getting too old to camp it up in a Donald Duck costume, and set about restraining his wardrobe a bit. He'd got into the habit of dressing in Armani, and had amassed quite a collection of the designer's shirts, which he eventually sold at auction in 2009.

The Red Piano debuted at The Colosseum in Caesars Palace, in Las Vegas on February 14, 2004. Created and designed by David LaChapelle, the spectacle was originally booked for 75 shows over three years, but the agreement was soon extended, and the final Red Piano show took place five years later on April 22, 2009. LaChapelle worked with Elton to develop a full production that incorporated videos playing on a 40ft high, 120ft wide screen behind the band, with famous faces popping up in the videos, such as Pamela Anderson performing a pole dance for *The Bitch Is Back* and Justin Timberlake acting as a young Elton in *Rocket Man*.

"I wanted to do a production that really reflected my tastes in art and photography," Elton said. "It was a chance to be reflective about my career, not in a sentimental way, but a fun way. It's one of the biggest stages in the world, so if you don't fill it up, you're in trouble.'

It was around this point that designer Keith Haberstroh began collaborating with Elton's wardrobe team, having previously worked with Celine Dion. Haberstroh rose through the ranks to become Elton's chief stagewear designer, designing suits with customised jackets to reflect various songs and albums, adding the detailing of thousands of embroidered Swarovski crystal rhinestones.

Elton the collector

SELL BIG, BUY BIGGER

In September 1988, Elton held an auction of 2000 items from his wardrobe and estate at Sotheby's. Claiming that he'd run out of space at home, it looked more like the collection of a hoarder with exquisite tastes. With four catalogues of items, and lasting four days, it was thought that it might just be a bit too overwhelming, but after the first day various items had fetched double their estimated worth, and an evening sale of mostly art deco jewellery also fetched more.

With everything from an array of his distinctive straw hats, Rembrandt etchings, furniture, duck costumes, gold and platinum discs, pinball machines and embroidered cushions, there was something for everyone. The giant fibreglass Doc Martens worn in Tommy? A snip at $20,000 (the boot company bought them). A pair of glasses with blue and yellow lenses in mother-of-pearl frames with rhinestones? $5,000. Elton's *Yellow Brick Road* cream canvas stage suit? Yours for $9,000. Everything passed its initial estimate price, and netted Elton $8.2 million in the process. Even an ordinary straw boater of John's from Dobbs of Fifth Avenue, size 7 1/8 inches, sold for $1,400. It's probably the most profitable house clearance in history.

Elton would sporadically hold auctions and pop-up sales over the years in aid of his charities. And it wasn't just for mad Elton collectors either, as in the temporary shop Out Of The Closet in 2009, which was held in Covent Garden, prices for the collection of top designer clothing ranged from £10 to £2000, so that fans on all budgets could find something to buy pre-owned by their idol.

He's also kept hold of some stuff: Elton has one of the greatest private collections of photography in the world, as he's spent the best part of 25 years accumulating a collection of works by – among others – Man Ray, Dorothea Lange and Brassai, and drawn from the modernist period of the 1920s–50s. His collection was lent to Tate Modern for an exhibition in 2016/7.

© Getty Images

Good times
AND DOING GOOD

© Getty Images

Elton and Lulu providing the entertainment during the White Tie & Tiara Ball at the singer's Windsor home in 2002

If the most cursory viewer of Elton John's lifestyle is aware of anything, it's that he knows how to throw a party. Significant birthdays and milestones have been celebrated with an array of fancy dress, with him done up as a dictator for his 60th, and the legendary Louis XIV get-up that had a wig so big Elton had to arrive to his 500-guest event in the back of a lorry.

His recent 70th birthday celebrations saw a more restrained affair in the form of a party in aid of his AIDS foundation. Much of Hollywood and the music world turned up to enjoy entertainment in the form of Lady Gaga and Stevie Wonder.

Since 1993 Elton has also been known for his Oscar parties, which have become *the* place to go after sitting through the lengthy ceremony. Anyone you can think of has attended, be it Elizabeth Taylor, Prince, Tom Hanks, Meryl Streep or Naomi Campbell, all tucking into a slap-up meal, usually by Gordon Ramsay. The event managed to raise over six million dollars for the EJAF in 2016.

Another annual event that helps Elton's charities is the White Tie & Tiara bashes that he and David host at their Windsor home. Elton's 37-acre estate is transformed into a wonderland for the evening, with each of the gardens brought to life with a host of themed performers and musicians which have ranged from characters from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* to a 13-piece orchestra and four opera singers, to live zebras and giraffes.

The evening's auctions would usually feature rare artwork from the likes of Damien Hirst or Tracey Emin, a kickabout with David Beckham and, if you're really lucky, a private yoga session with Sting. Since it began, the White Tie & Tiara Ball event alone has raised over £50 million to fund projects for those affected by HIV & AIDS in Europe, Africa, Asia and India.

© Getty Images

Each suit design is then given to Mr. Alex and Claire Couture of Beverly Hills, who've been making clothes for the singer since 1997. Elton's suits commonly take several months to make.

FUTURISTIC SUN KING

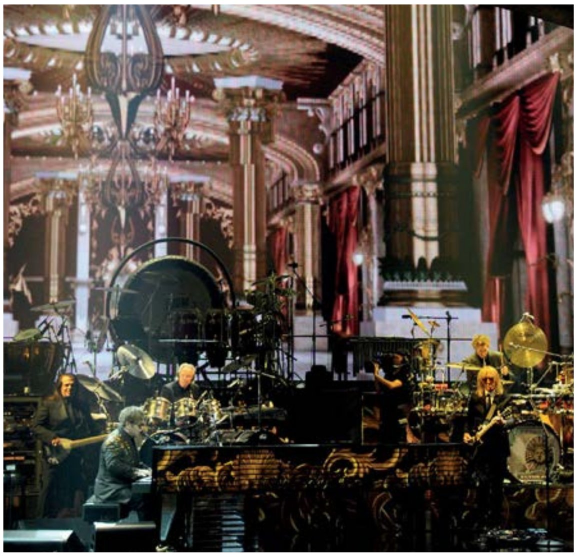
The year 2011 saw the first performances of The Million Dollar Piano, the show that celebrated Elton's 40th anniversary since first playing Vegas. The Million Dollar Piano itself was built specially for Elton by Yamaha. It weighs the same as a small family car, features more than 68 LED video screens and took nearly four years to construct.

The show was conceived and is directed by Patrick Woodroffe and Mark Fisher, who have collaborated on presenting some of the world's greatest live events for the past 25 years. Fisher had worked with Elton before on his 1999 Medusa tour, and he was the man behind stage designs such as Pink Floyd's The Wall, U2's 360 set, and the Queen-based musical *We Will Rock You* in the West End. Elton didn't want to see any of Mark's sketches for the show. Instead, believing in Fisher's concept of Elton being a 17th Century Sun King in a 21st Century Las Vegas (as you do), he wanted the big reveal to be a surprise.

"I guess Elton was happy with my description," Mark revealed to eltonjohn.com. "He wanted to arrive at The Colosseum two days before opening night, walk into the theatre and see everything for the first time. Over the following weeks I produced numerous sketches and detailed visualisations, but Elton saw none of them. He really did walk into the theatre, as promised, 48 hours before the first show. And I'm delighted to say that… he wept tears of joy."

Lighting designer Patrick Woodroffe, who'd previously worked with artists such as Take That, Bob Dylan and Abba, also explained to Elton's site about the technicalities of lighting the show. "The lighting is programmed into a control board over many long days and nights. A particular song is played over and over again while we analyse the rhythm, the mood,

"ELTON WANTED TO ARRIVE AT THE COLOSSEUM TWO DAYS BEFORE OPENING NIGHT AND SEE EVERYTHING FOR THE FIRST TIME. I'M DELIGHTED TO SAY HE WEPT TEARS OF JOY"



Above & Left **Elton performs during the first night of his show The Million Dollar Piano at The Colosseum at Caesars Palace in Las Vegas**

Below **Swarovski crystals have become a trademark of Elton's Keith Haberstroh-designed suits**

the lyrics and the musical changes and then – by instinct as much as anything – we paint a picture that accentuates all those elements."

No less than 19 short films were also created to accompany each song in the show by screen content producer Sam Pattinson, who'd worked on tours by U2 and Rolling Stones and also events such as The London Olympic Closing Ceremony in 2012. As luck would have it, Pattinson was already a huge Elton fan, and his dad had known Alan Aldridge – the artist behind the *Captain Fantastic* sleeve – at art school. His films were deliberately crammed full of little details that fans would be able to pick up on as the band performed. All these archive photos, notes and pieces of animation all helped make The Million Dollar Piano feel a little more intimate.

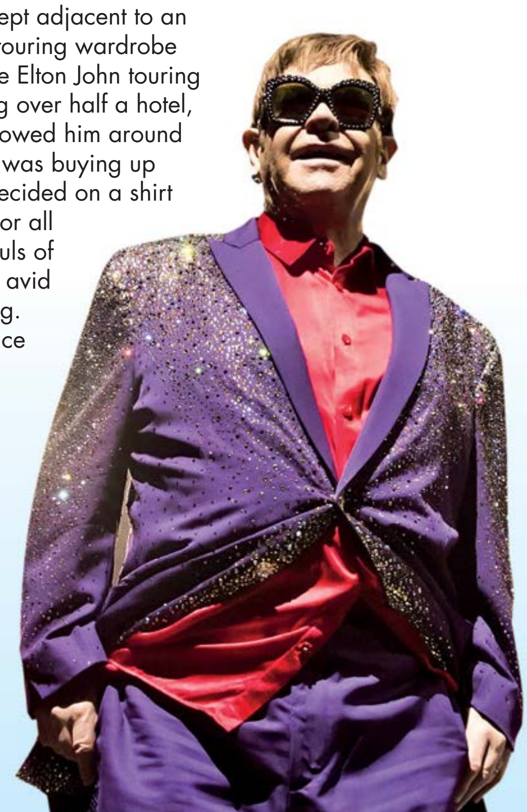
NO EXPENSE SPARED

Of course, all of this excess added to the unending tabloid gossip about what Elton spends his money on… truthful or otherwise. The public cannot get enough, it seems, of stories such as Elton splashing out £20,000 on a special castle for his horses on his Windsor estate, handing out Cartier watches to staff at Rocket, or racking up an astronomical bill on flowers. The latter news made considerable waves; when documents emerged about his spending habits in the late Nineties, giving some sort of insight into his alleged £1.5 million per month lifestyle, especially during a particularly spendy 20-month period, they showed he'd spent a colossal £293,000 on blooms across 18 months. Elton's response? "I like flowers."

And let's not forget the glasses. Elton once claimed, surely joshingly, to the BBC that he owns "a quarter of a million" pairs, all prescription; sadly, reports that he demanded a separate hotel room (kept at 16°c, obviously) for his collection when he played Brazil in 2013 proved to be a load of rubbish. Some of his specs are practical, to match any number of outfits, and there's the more impractical ones bestowed with gnomes, beads, diamonds or windscreen wipers.

The documentary *Tantrums & Tiaras* showed Elton carting a fridge of English delicacies such as Marks & Spencer muffins and Marmite around on tour. The fact that the fridge was kept adjacent to an entire room dedicated to his touring wardrobe seemed relatively low-key. The Elton John touring experience had form in taking over half a hotel, and when the film-makers followed him around on a typical day – whether it was buying up dozens of CDs, or being undecided on a shirt in a clothing shop so opting for all of them, or scooping up armfuls of art – it revealed him to be an avid collector and fan of everything.

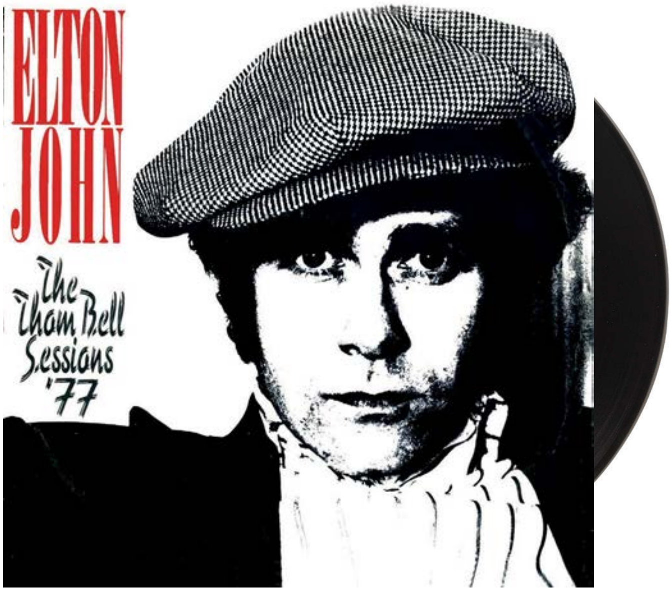
Elton's style and flamboyance hasn't always gone down well with everyone. In 2013, when John was scheduled to perform in Russia, a Communist group ordered the singer to wear a traditional Cossack outfit because they considered his outfits to be homosexual propaganda. Which sort of entirely misses the point of "Being Elton John".



REISSUES AND BEYOND

FOR THE COMMITTED ELTON JOHN VINYL COLLECTOR, LIFE IS A RICH BANQUET INDEED – BUT DON'T BE ALARMED BY THE COMPLEXITY OF THE SITUATION, AS THERE ARE PLENTY OF COOL ITEMS WORTH THE ATTENTION OF PURE MUSIC LOVERS TOO…

IAN PEEL



THE THOM BELL SESSIONS – 2016 12"

"Following a temporary hiatus in his partnership with long-time lyricist Bernie Taupin," explains 2016's Record Store Day promo pack for this 12" reissue, "Elton John turned to producer Thom Bell and the warm sounds of Philly soul for his next step... Bell was already a name producer for his work with some of the decade's biggest R&B acts such as the Spinners, the Stylistics and the Detroit Spinners and, while recorded in 1977, the fruits of their collaboration would not find an official release until 1979, by which time Elton's ever-restless muse had already moved on. They were not, however, destined to languish in obscurity and by the late Nineties copies of the original 12" of the sessions were changing hands for silly money among house heads." One of those "house heads", Ashley Beedle, eventually remixed the EP's *Are You Ready* and gave Elton a No. 1 single in 2003.

AMERICAN HUSTLE – COLOURED VINYL

This great soundtrack has been reissued on deluxe, double, coloured vinyl – and it came in at No. 12 in Classic Popcorn!, *Classic Pop* magazine's recent countdown of The Top 40 Movie Soundtracks Albums of all time. Part black comedy, part crime caper, David O Russell's 2013, 10-times-Oscar nominated movie placed Elton amidst a soundtrack that oozes pure Seventies excess. *Goodbye Yellow Brick Road* is here, alongside not one but three tracks from Electric Light Orchestra and/or Jeff Lynne, plus the Bee Gees' *How Can You Mend A Broken Heart?* and even a classic from another movie entirely, Wings' *Live And Let Die*. Released by Columbia Records for Record Store Day's Black Friday special event in November 2014, this 150gram edition actually featured six additional songs that did not appear on the movie's accompanying CD release.

SONGS FROM THE WEST COAST – 2017 REISSUE

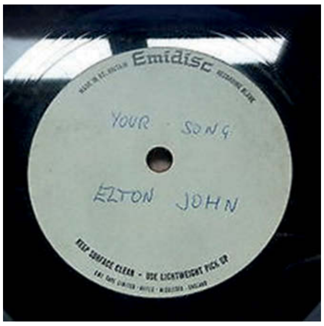
After receiving its first ever vinyl pressing as part of the infamous six-album Burberry box set, this stand-alone edition from earlier this year replicates the 2001 tracklist with 12 songs spread across two discs – which means you'll have to head to Spotify for the CD edition's very random selection of bonus tracks, like Junior Vasquez's Earth Mix of *Original Sin* and *Teardrops*, a collaboration with Lulu. On plastic, songs like *The Ballad Of The Boy In The Red Shoes* and *Birds* could have come from one of Elton's most powerful and memorable late-Seventies albums, yet perhaps what brought his songwriting out of the doldrums for this record was a remarkable twist in an already-unique partnership: each song was a collaboration with Taupin, of course, but this was the first time they'd written together in person.

I'VE BEEN LOVING YOU – 7" PROMO

According to the Popsike website, this – A Portuguese four-track promo EP that fetched £5155 in 2008 – is Elton's highest-value vinyl. If you haven't come across Popsike, it's a must for collectors. It's rather like the WayBack Machine of eBay, and their ongoing mission is to archive every eBay music sale there's ever been (eBay, of course, only archives finished sales for a few months). Consequently, if you want to check the value of one of your LPs or singles before you sell it, you can just search for on Popsike to see what prices it's fetched online over the years… a pretty good way, we think, of gauging the going market rate. One word of warning, though – Popsike is also on a mission to monetise its service, so you only get 10 free searches before you have to become a subscriber.

A BURBERRY LIMITED EDITION – BOX SET

Elton's first foray into deluxe vinyl reissues was suitably exclusive, extravagant and grandiose. Released in November of 2016 and limited to just 800 units, this was an six-album box set of 180gram Abbey Road-mastered pressings. Available exclusively at Burberry stores, the box was embossed with Elton's signature and, as the press release memorably proclaimed, "flecked with gold glitter". "Choosing these six albums wasn't easy," Elton said of the task of curation, "however I think they are a very good representation of my catalogue between 1970 and 2001." The ones he opted for? 1970's *Elton John*, 1971's *Madman Across The Water* and *17-11-70*, 1975's *Captain Fantastic And The Brown Dirt Cowboy*, 1983's *Too Low For Zero* and – getting its first ever release on vinyl – 2001's *Songs From The West Coast*.



YOUR SONG – 7" ACETATE

Back in Issue Six of *Classic Pop* magazine in 2013, for our occasional Celebrity Squares column, Nik Kershaw revealed that Elton John's *Your Song* was the first single he ever bought. What a great choice – and if by some long shot his copy was a 1969 one-sided acetate, then Nik would be sitting on a small goldmine, as it was an EmiDisc acetate edition of *Your Song* that sold on eBay (after just 15 bids) in February 2015 for £1,020. Originally the property of the British film director Hamish McAlpine, he'd been given the record by Elton John himself in the late Sixties. If that is out of your price range, then even if you have the 10-a-penny finished 7" version in your collection, you're still sitting not on a goldmine but on one of Elton's great, early B-sides, *Into The Old Man's Shoes*.

GOODBYE YELLOW BRICK ROAD – 1973 LP

Elton's seventh album is widely regarded as one of his definitive statements, and without doubt you could almost make a career out of collecting the multifarious editions of just this one LP. All the same, the question as to whether or not good old traditional vinyl really is the perfect format for this album is a matter of ongoing debate. Indeed, Blu-Ray Audio would be the choice of *Classic Pop* reader Ken Hillier: "They offer far superior sound quality to CDs," he offered in Issue 20's Transmission section, "and many offer a 5.1 mix of the album which can really blow your socks off. If you need any persuasion then I highly recommend getting hold of a copy of Elton John's *Goodbye Yellow Brick Road* album on Blu-Ray Audio and a surround sound kit and listen to the 5.1 mix. This mix truly blew me away."

MADMAN ACROSS THE WATER – 1971 LP

Elton's sixth album – his fourth studio album – is still regarded with great fondness by lovers of the earlier works. Indeed, in reviewing Elton John vinyls, I took a trip to a record shop to get some fresh input. David's Music in Letchworth is quite the institution. They opened in 1990, although the neighbouring David's Books has been up and running since 1963. "I think *Goodbye Yellow Brick Road* was the first Elton John album I properly got into," Andy told me from behind the counter, "so that has stayed as my favourite ever since. Tons of great music across two LPs, which is so difficult to do by any artist." And what of this 1971 opus? "Well, 1971 was such a great year for music, and *Madman Across The Water* kicked off with the amazing *Tiny Dancer*, so that has to be right up there too."

ROCKET MAN – KATE BUSH 7"

Another life's work you could choose would be collecting Elton cover versions – and, if you did, then this is probably the first one you should buy. Released on 7" and 12" in 1991, it was originally recorded for *Two Rooms*, the Elton/Bernie Taupin tribute album. "From the age of 11, Elton John was my biggest hero," Kate once said. "I loved his music, had all his albums and I hoped one day I'd play the piano like him (I still do). When I was asked to be involved in this project it was like being asked 'would you like to fulfil a dream?'" Kate poignantly performed the song on the *Wogan* TV show, standing a guitar and candle on a chair where her late guitarist Alan Murphy would have stood. Alan had died not long before, and Kate's *Rocket Man* was one of the last tracks he ever recorded.

FLAMBOYANT – PET SHOP BOYS

Of the many and varied Elton/Pet Shop Boys releases – which we explore elsewhere in this special issue – this one's a little tangential, but well worth picking up. Released on 12" in 2004, it was, as we reported back in the very first issue of *Classic Pop*, "the second previously-unreleased track on the *PopArt* compilation. The lyrics – like *How Can You Expect To Be Taken Seriously?* – address one or more unnamed celebrities. Neil Tennant has said that it's about no one in particular, but rather an "archetype"… the kind of person sometimes described as an "attention whore". And, as Neil told one interviewer, "It's about the importance of flamboyant people in our way of life... people like Oscar Wilde and Quentin Crisp, Boy George and Marilyn, Elton John and David Beckham... Anyone with a bit of sparkle."

I'M STILL STANDING – SINGLE

This was the second single from Elton's *Too Low For Zero* album and the first to be boosted to the top of the charts (well, almost: it was No. 4 in the UK) by an MTV-friendly video, stills from which were used on the front of the 12" and rear of the 7". Back in *Classic Pop* Issue 18's Live Aid special we pinpointed its breathtaking performance to exactly 20h50 on the Wembley stage as part of a set that also took in *Bennie And The Jets, Rocket Man, Don't Go Breaking My Heart* with Kiki Dee, *Don't Let The Sun Go Down On Me* with George Michael and *Can I Get A Witness*. The 12" version didn't have an extended mix, using just the standard 3:46 mix on the A-side, but it did switch the credit for the B-side – *Earn While You Learn* – from Elton John as it appeared on the 7" to his Lord Choc Ice alter-ego.

© Getty Images

"Being me is a bit like being king in a medieval court" On himself, *The Telegraph*, 2016

"I think everyone who lip-syncs on stage in public when you pay like 75 quid to see them should be shot" On Madonna, *Q* Awards 2004

"We're all f***ing monsters sometimes" On the self, *Rolling Stone*, 2016

"HE WAS PROBABLY ONE OF THE MOST BRILLIANT SONGWRITERS THIS COUNTRY'S EVER PRODUCED, AND CERTAINLY ONE OF THE BEST VOCALISTS EVER. ONE OF THE BEST IN THE WORLD"
On George Michael

"I was afraid of my father. I was walking on eggshells the whole time trying to get his approval. He's been dead for a long time, and I'm still trying to prove things to him" On his father, *Rolling Stone*

"I've always had an insatiable appetite. If it's not music, it's theatre or film, collecting photography, helping with the Aids Foundation. I throw myself into everything 150 per cent. It keeps me young, it keeps me interested" On motivation, The *Telegraph* 2016

"Live for each second without hesitation" On life

"Ask anyone. If it hadn't been for Elvis, I don't know where popular music would be. He was the one that started it all off, and he was definitely the start of it for me" On the King

"SOMETIMES WHEN I'M FLYING OVER THE ALPS I THINK, 'THAT'S LIKE ALL THE COCAINE I SNIFFED'" ON DRUGS

"I THINK PEOPLE SHOULD BE FREE TO ENGAGE IN ANY SEXUAL PRACTICES THEY CHOOSE. THEY SHOULD DRAW THE LINE AT GOATS THOUGH" ON SEX

"If you write great songs with meaning and emotion, they will last for ever because songs are the key to everything " On songwriting

"Music has healing power. It has the ability to take people out of themselves for a few hours" On music

SIR ELTON JOHN
IN HIS OWN WORDS

AS A MENTOR, RACONTEUR, PHILANTHROPIST OR SHARP-TONGUED LOUDMOUTH, ELTON JOHN IS ONE OF POP MUSIC'S MOST COLOURFUL CHARACTERS WHO'S OCCUPIED A SPECTRUM OF GUISES, FROM GUIDING GURU TO SHOWBIZ PRIMADONNA. WE PICK OUT HIS BEST QUOTES…

COMPILED BY RIK FLYNN

"The AIDS disease is caused by a virus, but the AIDS epidemic is not. The AIDS epidemic is fuelled by stigma, by hate, by misinformation, by ignorance, by indifference. Science has accomplished miracles over the past 20 years, and science can now end this disease – but it cannot end the epidemic. We need more than medicine. We can do something about these things. We need to speak out about the changes we need to make in our society" On AIDS

"There's something about British men that can't wait to get into drag" On Brits, *Rolling Stone*

"I'm glad I've given up drugs and alcohol. It would be awful to be like Keith Richards. He's pathetic. It's like a monkey with arthritis, trying to go onstage and look young" On Keith Richards

"I WENT UP TO PRINCE AND SAID 'I'M A BIG FAN OF YOUR STUFF' AND HE LOOKED AT ME AND JUST WALKED OFF… LEFT ME STANDING THERE LIKE A **. HE'S A PRAT, BUT A CLEVER PRAT" ON PRINCE**

"I've always wanted to smash a guitar over someone's head. You just can't do that with a piano" On pianos

"I love the idea of the teachings of Jesus Christ and the beautiful stories about it, which I loved in Sunday school and I collected all the little stickers and put them in my book. But the reality is that organised religion doesn't seem to work. It turns people into hateful lemmings and it's not really compassionate" On religion

"I CALL HIM YOKO" ON DAVID FURNISH, TELEGRAPH, 2016

"I love drag queens and I love going to see them perform because those people have got so much character and bravery. Such balls! I love people with balls" On drag queens

"I'm going to fight for human rights, whether I do it silently behind the scenes or vocally so that I get locked up. I can't just sit back; it's not in my nature. I can't sit back and blindly ignore it, and I won't" On human rights

"I DIDN'T REALLY KNOW WHAT I WAS UNTIL I CAME TO AMERICA AND I HAD SEX (FOR THE FIRST TIME) IN SAN FRANCISCO IN 1970. IT WAS WITH SOMEONE OF MY OWN SEX" ON SEXUAL DISCOVERY

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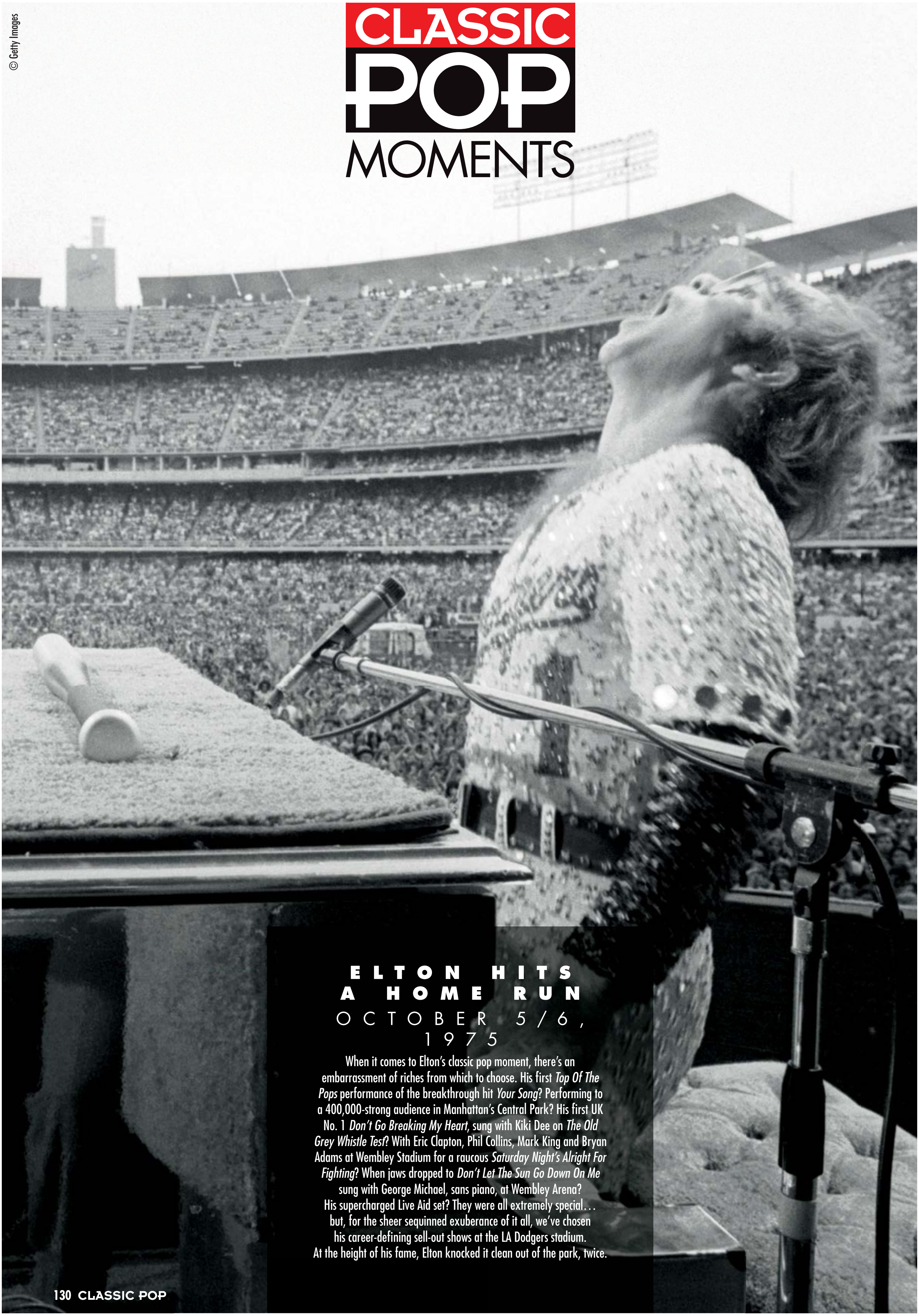
CLASSIC POP MOMENTS



ELTON HITS A HOME RUN

OCTOBER 5/6, 1975

When it comes to Elton's classic pop moment, there's an embarrassment of riches from which to choose. His first *Top Of The Pops* performance of the breakthrough hit *Your Song*? Performing to a 400,000-strong audience in Manhattan's Central Park? His first UK No. 1 *Don't Go Breaking My Heart*, sung with Kiki Dee on *The Old Grey Whistle Test*? With Eric Clapton, Phil Collins, Mark King and Bryan Adams at Wembley Stadium for a raucous *Saturday Night's Alright For Fighting*? When jaws dropped to *Don't Let The Sun Go Down On Me* sung with George Michael, sans piano, at Wembley Arena? His supercharged Live Aid set? They were all extremely special… but, for the sheer sequinned exuberance of it all, we've chosen his career-defining sell-out shows at the LA Dodgers stadium. At the height of his fame, Elton knocked it clean out of the park, twice.

KING JOHN FIRST!
Original Motion Picture Soundtrack
The Muse
Film score composed and performed by
Elton John
Elton John The Fox
Elton John · The Complete Thom Bell Sessions
Tumbleweed Connection
Elton John
Elton John
Made in England
Reg Strikes Back
Elton John
Elton John
rare masters
Elton John
Peachtree
Road
Elton John Love Songs
elton john - one night only
the greatest hits
Elton John
live in
Australia
with the melbourne symphony orchestra
Walt Disney Pictures Presents
The Lion King
Original Motion Picture Soundtrack
Elton John
Elton John
Lady Samantha
Elton John
Ice on Fire
elton john
greatest hits 1976 · 1986
elton john.
sleeping with the past.
Gnomeo & Juliet
Original songs: music by Elton John lyrics by Bernie Taupin
Elton John
The Thom Bell Sessions '77
elton john
blue eyes
Elton John
Candle in the wind
Bennie and the Jets
The Lion King
Can You Feel The Love Tonight
Elton John
Crocodile Rock
Elderberry Wine
Stereo
Elton John
Don't let the sun go down on me
Sick City
Elton John · Empty Garden
what happened here?
Elton John
Kiki Dee
Elton John
I'm still standing
Someone Saved My Life Tonight
Elton John
House of Cards
From The Original Motion Picture Soundtrack Of Walt Disney Pictures
The Lion King
Elton John
Circle of Life
Elton John
The Bridge
from the forthcoming album
The Captain & The Kid
elton john
benny and the jets
candle in the wind
The Elton John Band
Philadelphia Freedom

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